

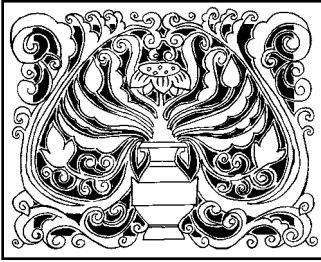


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PB October 2008

Contents

Traditional Wisdom	519
This Month	520
Editorial: Our Mythical Being	521
Valmiki's Rama: Human and Divine	523
Swami Sanmatrananda	
Valmiki's Sita: A Kaleidoscope of Perceptions	530
Dr Sumita Roy	
Hanuman:	535
Valour, Wisdom, Humility, and Devotion	
A P N Pankaj	
Manimekalai: Physician to the Hungry	543
Dr Prema Nandakumar	
Frames and Their Fills	547
Swami Samarpanananda	
Light on Patanjali – III	551
Swami Sarvagatananda	
Vithoba of Pandharpur	553
Dr Suruchi Pande	
Ramakrishna's Influence on Girish's Plays	559
Swami Chetanananda	
Reviews	563
Reports	565

TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

Remembering Sri Rama

October 2008

Vol. 113, No. 10

यन्मायावशवर्ति विश्वमखिलं ब्रह्मादिदेवासुराः
यत्सत्त्वादमृषैव भाति सकलं रज्जौ यथाहेर्भ्रमः ।
यत्पादप्लवमेव भाति हि भवाम्भोधेस्तितीर्षावतां
वन्देऽहं तमशेषकारणपरं रामाख्यमीशं हरिम् ॥

I salute the Supreme Lord Hari, known as Rama, the cause transcending all relative causes, whose mysterious power controls all beings in the worlds, including Brahma, the *devas* and the *asuras*; whose substance gives reality to all things just as the rope does to the illusory snake superimposed on it; and whose feet alone shine before the spiritual aspirant as a boat for crossing the ocean of samsara.

उद्धवस्थितिसंहारकारिणीं क्लेशहारिणीम् ।
सर्वश्रेयस्करिं सीतां नतोऽहं रामवल्लभाम् ॥

I salute Sita, the consort of Rama, who is the power that creates, sustains, and dissolves the universe, who saves devotees from all tribulations and promotes their welfare in all respects.

मूलं धर्मतरोर्विवेकजलधेः पूर्णेन्दुमानन्दं
वैराग्याम्बुजभास्करं ह्यघघनध्वान्तापहं तापहम् ।
मोहाम्भोधरपुञ्जपाटनविधौ खे सम्भवं शङ्करं
वन्दे ब्रह्मकुले कलङ्कशमनं श्रीरामभूषं प्रियम् ॥

I salute the royal Rama, the beloved of all, the emancipator of the line of brahmanas from the stain brought on it (by Ravana), the root of the tree of righteousness, the delightful moon rising over the sea of wisdom, the sun bringing to bloom the lotus of dispassion, the auspicious heaven-born wind that scatters the thick cloud of delusion, the dispeller of the dense darkness of sin and the suffering born of it.

सीतारामगुणग्रामपुण्यारण्यविहारिणौ ।
वन्दे विशुद्धविज्ञानौ कवीश्वरकपीश्वरौ ॥

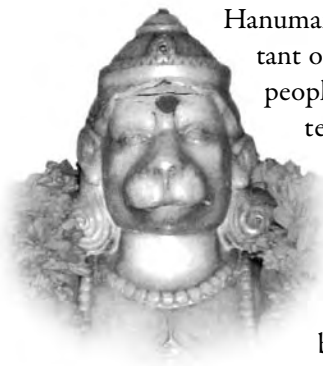
I salute the king of poets (Valmiki) and the king of the *vanaras* (Hanuman), who, endowed with the purest spiritual insight, roam the sacred forest of the abundant excellences of Sita and Rama.

THIS MONTH

Not only are the Itihasas and Puranas a treasure trove of historical information on life and culture in ancient India, they are also the wellsprings that keep watering the Indian ethos perennially. For those of us who are grounded in Indian culture, **Our Mythical Being** is also constructed by these texts. This number, and the next, will show us how.

Sri Ramachandra has captivated Indian minds since ages as the ideal embodiment of dharma and nobility, the *maryada purushottama*. Though the Ramayana makes his divine nature amply clear, he also comes through as an intensely human personality. In **Valmiki's Rama: Human and Divine**, Swami Sanmatranandaji, a monastic member of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Viveknagar, examines this paradox and reminds us how Sri Rama provides vital solutions to our problems.

Though Sita has long been held to be 'the ideal of Indian womanhood', the nature of this ideal has been the subject of much study and debate. In her article **Valmiki's Sita: A Kaleidoscope of Perceptions**, Dr Sumita Roy, Professor of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad, reviews the traditional as well as contemporary scholarship on Sita and emphasizes that the 'empowerment wrested by revolution or demanded violently, clearly seems to have been hers by right'.



Hanuman is one of the most important of the myriad characters that people the Ramayana. If his strategic insight, superhuman strength, exceptional skill, and prodigious wisdom draw our admiration, his humility and devotion render him utterly lovable. Sri A P N Pankaj, a lit-

érateur of repute from Chandigarh, presents a scholarly appraisal of Hanuman's personality in his article **Hanuman: Valour, Wisdom, Humility, and Devotion**.

The ancient Tamil epic *Manimekalai* is a powerful statement of the twin Indian ideals of 'renunciation and service'. In **Manimekalai: Physician to the Hungry**, Dr Prema Nandakumar, researcher and literary critic from Srirangam, revisits the many versions of the story to capture the spirit of *Manimekalai* and her times.



Swami Samarpananandaji, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur, weighs the relative importance of paradigms and their contents, especially in the context of human behaviour, in his article **Frames and Their Fills**.

The importance of positive thoughts has been widely highlighted in popular literature in recent times. But the equally important need for cultivating forgiveness often goes unappreciated. Both these elements of harmonious living are discussed by Swami Sarvagatanandaji of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, in **Light on Patanjali - III**.

Dr Suruchi Pande, Researcher, Department of Sanskrit, University of Pune, concludes her study of **Vithoba of Pandharpur** with a survey of some of the illustrious saints of the Varkari tradition.

In the third instalment of **Ramakrishna's Influence on Girish's Plays**, the focus is on the historical drama *Kalapahar*. The article is authored by Swami Chetananandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis.

Our Mythical Being

THE ancient Mesopotamian civilizations of Sumer and Akkad hosted a rich pantheon of remarkable deities and a vibrant mythology capturing their varied personalities and diverse exploits. Sumer was one of the first regions to develop large city states with all their attendant problems. Enlil, the chief deity of Nippur, one of the important Sumerian city states, was the master of the air and the land below. A great warrior, he conferred power on the kings and visited the city with assaults when the citizens acted wrongly.

As the population of the ancient cities rose, so great was the din that it kept Enlil awake all night. Exasperated, he convinced the gods to thin out the cities with a visitation of plague. Fortunately, a wise man named Utnapishtim or Atrahasis realized that everything was not well with the cities. He consulted Enki, the god of wisdom and the waters, and learnt about the impending disaster. Utnapishtim warned the other citizens, who responded by keeping quiet and propitiating Namtar, the plague god, with offerings. The measures were effective and the plague was averted.

Human memory, however, is short. The noise level rose again and this time Enlil ravaged the cities with drought. Enki bailed out the populace again by sending fish along the rivers and canals for people to feed upon. But when Enlil finally devastated the land with storm and flood, only the creatures that Utnapishtim had managed to take aboard a special ship survived.

Does the above tale sound familiar? It reminds us of Manu and Noah, for one. The existence of similar mythical matrices in different geographical locations and cultures points to our shared humanity. If we differ as individuals and as ethnic communities, we also share mental traits and ways of

thinking, hopes and aspirations, beliefs and fears.

The predicament of the Mesopotamian cities is also uncannily our own: Noise pollution, drought, and flood; containment measures—both secular and religious—that are never quite adequate; and devastation, which only the wise, the prepared, and the lucky escape. This contemporaneity is the unique feature of Puranic myths. Though unimaginably old, they are ever new, *pura api nava*. The Ramayana tale was an old story even in ancient India; but listening to it, or seeing it enacted, is always a fresh experience.

Going through the Ramayana is not merely an aesthetic experience. True myths supply clues to our own nature, illumine the dark recesses of our mind harbouring desires and conflicts, bring interpersonal and inter-communal relations into focus—playing up the subtleties and tensions underlying human behaviour, and the ethics and casuistry underpinning it—provide access to spiritual verities, and hold up morals and ideals as no human preacher could do.

The ideal society of the Ramayana, Sister Nivedita points out, is based on dharma. In the society that Valmiki contemplates, ‘the severity of social discipline increases towards the summit: those who have the greatest power must practise the greatest self-restraint, partly because of *noblesse oblige*, partly because such austere discipline is the necessary condition without which power would rapidly melt away’.

Over against this human world of the silver age is drawn the sinful and inhuman world of the *rakshasas*, where greed and lust and violence and deceit replace generosity and self-restraint and gentleness and truth. But these evil passions are outwardly directed against men and gods and all those who are,

for the *rakshasas*, aliens: amongst themselves there are filial affection and the uttermost of wifely devotion, there are indomitable courage and the truest loyalty. The city of the *rakshasas* is pre-eminently fair, built by Vishvakarman himself; they practise all the arts; they worship the gods, and by austerity and penance win great gifts of them: in other words, they flourish like the bay-tree, and if they are evil, at least they are not ignoble. Amongst them are found some, like Vibhishana, not evil at all. After all, then, these *rakshasas* are not inhuman at all, but their estate is the image of the *adharmic*, unrighteous, aspect of human society—an allegory which we should all understand were it presented to us today for the first time, like the Penguins of Anatole France.


Though we might have gone through the Ramayana many times over, it still comes as a surprise that many of our ideals and aspirations are indeed *asuric*, demoniac, not very different in nature from those cherished by the cultured *rakshasas* of Lanka. The Bhagavadgita paints a graphic picture of such aspirations: 'This I have gained today, and that longing I shall fulfil. This wealth is mine, and that also shall be mine in future. That enemy I have slain, and others too I shall slay. I am the lord of all; I enjoy; I am prosperous, mighty, and happy. I am rich; I am of high birth. Who else is equal to me? I will offer sacrifice, I will give, I will rejoice.' 'Ostentation, arrogance, and self-conceit; anger, rudeness, and ignorance' characterize the *asuric* mind, and these are fostered by a supportive world view: 'The world is devoid of truth, without a moral basis, and without a God. It is brought about by the union of the male and the female, and lust alone is its cause: what else?'

It is only against this background that the higher human values represented by Rama and his companions stand out as exceptional. In Rama, power is not vitiated by arrogance or conceit, strength is not manifested through anger, nor does lust masquerade as chivalry. For Sita, suffering is not weakening or demeaning, and in Hanuman, obedience is not servile. Such attitudes are born of a concordant world view which sees the human being as essentially divine and the Atman as deathless, which

apprehends all knowledge and power as being inherent in the human soul and has access to the means to tap it. The Ramayana provides us direct entry into this world view. 'In these [the Ramayana and the Mahabharata]', Lin Yutang observes, 'we are brought closer to the atmosphere, ideals and customs of ancient Hindu life than by a hundred volumes of commentary on the Upanishads.'

Can legendary personages and mythical ideals really have a lasting impact today? This question keeps haunting us because we take myths to be mere tales or a dated way of viewing the world. On the contrary, all human thought has a mythical dimension to it because 'myth is that which is taken for granted when thought begins'. Myths 'reflect, express, and explore' a people's self-image. Edward Conze notes: 'Polytheism is very much alive even among us. But where formerly Athene, Baal, Astarte, Isis, Sarasvati, Kwan Yin, etc., excited the popular imagination, it is nowadays inflamed by such words as *Democracy, Progress, Civilization, Equality, Liberty, Reason, Science*, etc. A multitude of personal beings have given way to a multitude of abstract nouns.'

The paradigms of science are also analogous to myths; they are likely to be replaced with advancement of knowledge. Discussions on issues bordering on the limits of our scientific knowledge—about the origin, nature, and locus of consciousness, or about the boundaries of our universe, for instance—are also bound to have a mythical character.

The ideals represented by Rama, Sita, and Hanuman are not mere intellectual concepts. 'You partake of the nature of him on whom you meditate,' Sri Ramakrishna observed. 'By worshipping Shiva you acquire the nature of Shiva.' More important, these personalities are spiritual entities that can be directly accessed and which determine and direct our spiritual being: 'A true Shaiva has some of the characteristics of Shiva; ... He who is a true Vaishnava is endowed with some of the elements of Narayana.' It would be a pity if we chose to ignore these ideals. In doing so, we would be negating the very core of our being. 

Valmiki's Rama: Human and Divine

Swami Sanmatrananda

THE Lonely Voice • 'I walk alone when the day folds its wings and the setting sun bids adieu to the earth. Birds are returning to their nests. The dark curtain of evening is descending slowly. But I don't feel like seeing all this. With my head bent I walk the path of life in an indrawn mood. My days are monotonous. I have none to go back to in the evening; no relative, no friend, not even an acquaintance.

'I entered life like a blooming lotus on an autumn morning. I was brought up under the affectionate care of my parents. I received love and affection from all quarters. But the story of my life soon changed. My dreams turned into dust ...

'I feel myself the loneliest man on earth. This loneliness creeps into me and turns my heart into a haunted house ...

'I don't like rubbing shoulders with others, knowing full well that the story of my life is different from theirs. I stand alone. Is it possible for me to accept my present life wholeheartedly? Is it possible for me to attain a poise of heart in spite of my failures and depression?

'Is there any way out of this prison of loneliness and suffering for those who have lost everything in their lives? Metaphysical speculations do no good to them. Moral codes are but dry prescriptions. A life, a burning life, a living example of an individual who surpasses them in both suffering and endurance—who is intensely human and who, at the same time, reaches the dizzy heights which ordinary humans dare not scale—such a life alone can show them the way. Is there one such?'

A voice reaches the lonely soul, breaking the stillness of the evening. It is not a singular human voice; it speaks for all suffering souls of the world—those who are lonely, who have lost all, who have

found no solace in their lives.

The Reply • 'Yes, there is one. The hero of an ancient epic, yet more real than beings in our mundane world of action and contemplation; of royal lineage, yet identified with every one of the common run through insufferable loss and bereavement; separated from us by an almost unbridgeable gulf of time, yet intertwined with the unending life of humanity: Sri Rama, the central character of the Ramayana, has long remained the mentor to all who suffer, the solace for all who are persecuted and who have never found rest in their weary journey through time.'

We have all heard the queries that the lonely voice raised. The poet-prophet Valmiki too has raised similar questions at the beginning of the Ramayana. When the floodgates of his creative imagination opened in his heart, Valmiki felt the deep urge to portray a colossal character that would inspire humankind, cutting across the barriers of untold ages. He poses his queries to the mythical sage Narada:

Tell me about a person of our time who is the very abode of vigour and virtue, who knows the mystery of dharma, the all-encompassing life-principle, who is the very embodiment of truth and gratitude, who never wavers from the vows he has taken, who is endowed with great character and is constantly engaged in the welfare of all beings, who is of adorable form and a man of knowledge, skill, and self-realization, who has conquered anger, who never finds faults with others, whose being is lustrous, and whose valour in war even the gods fear. I am deeply interested to know of such a human being from you, since you alone are fit to speak about such a person.¹

In reply, Narada briefly narrates the life of Sri Rama, which is later elaborated upon by Valmiki in his epic.

Two Ramas?

Valmiki's main thrust is on the human aspect of Rama; but he does not overlook his hero's divinity altogether. As we go through the pages of the Ramayana, we come across both these facets of Rama's character; and the simultaneity of these apparently contradictory aspects sometimes bewilders us. We wonder: Are we reading the life story of one person or of two? Are there two Ramas, then? The reconciliation of these two apparently divergent visions alone can lead us to the conception of this mighty personality as the sure shelter for suffering humanity.

Profoundly Human

Humans love their kith and kin dearly, get attached to them, and mourn their loss. They respect their elders and show love and kindness to their young ones, though they resent ingratitude. They are elated at the prospect of success and fall into abysmal depths of despondency in the face of failure. They are often swayed by doubts and blame destiny in the hours of dejection. They critically analyse their past and lament over their mistakes, but long for a bright future even when the last ray of hope grows faint. These human qualities are all conspicuous in Rama's character. In this respect, there is no other avatara in the Hindu pantheon more human than Rama. When he saw the gods praising him and ascribing divinity to his character, he was wonderstruck. He called himself human and asked the gods to tell him what he was, if not human:

*Ātmānam mānuṣam manye
rāmam daśarathātmajam;
Yo'ham yasya yataścāham
bhagavānstad-bravītu me.*

I know myself as a human being—Rama, the son of Dasharatha. Tell me then, O Lord, who I am, to whom I belong, and wherefrom I have come.²

This profoundly human face of Rama has brought him into the closest possible proximity to the average human being.

Born and brought up amidst the luxury of the royal palace, it was all sunshine for Rama in his

childhood. He was the eldest of four brothers, the unfurled flag of victory to the royal lineage, the favourite of his father, *teṣāṃ keturiva jyeṣṭho rāmo ratikarāḥ pituh'* (1.18.23), and bliss itself—*mātrmandana*—to his mother, Kausalya (2.20.20). To Rama, his brother Lakshmana was 'bahiḥ prāṇa ivāparāḥ; like the life force playing outside his mortal frame', his shadow, his alter ego (1.18.28). His relationship with his subjects was equally intimate. He was as compassionate as the earth, as wise as Brihaspati, the preceptor of the gods, and as valorous as Indra, the king of the gods (2.1.32). The subjects of Ayodhya were so shocked at the news of Rama's exile that they were ready to leave their homes and hearths and go to the forest with him. Rama had to strongly dissuade them from doing so. He was enshrined in the hearts of his subjects even before the preparations for his formal coronation.

What was Rama doing just before he received the heart-breaking news of his exile? He had not concealed his joy at the prospect of coronation under the garb of indifference of a so-called ascetic. Seated on the royal bed in his decorated chamber, adorned with glittering ornaments, and anointed with auspicious sandal paste, he was talking joyously with his beloved wife. He looked like 'the lustrous moon by the side of the star Chitra'. Sumantra, the ageing minister, approached him with reverence and conveyed the message that both Dasharatha and Kaikeyi were expecting him at the royal palace. Rama could not even dream what terrible news was awaiting him. He turned to Sita in all innocence and said: 'Surely both of them are discussing my coronation. Mother Kaikeyi is ever affectionate towards me. She must certainly have been elated on hearing the news of my prospective coronation from father. She probably has asked father special gifts for me. It's my great good fortune and I must see them' (2.16.15–20).

As he approached his father, he saw Dasharatha seated by Kaikeyi's side, looking like 'the eclipsed sun or like a rishi who has spoken an untruth'. It was from Kaikeyi that Rama came to know about the sudden turn in his fortunes—that the king's mind had been changed, that he was to go into exile for

fourteen years and Bharata was to be installed as the king of Ayodhya. It is true that Rama's calm demeanour was not disturbed by this shattering news. But the epic poet did not forget to tell us that Rama felt like 'a horse lashed with a whip to hasten to the forest by the terrible words of Kaikeyi' (2.19.18). He accepted this fiery ordeal and went to inform his mother Kausalya about his impending departure. Before breaking this sad news to his mother, Rama had to make special efforts to control his senses and conceal his mental suffering (2.19.35). However, when he returned to his inner apartments, back in the presence of Sita, his beloved wife, he could restrain himself no more. He entered the room with his head bent in shame. Sita found her husband overcome by sadness and his senses restless, *cintāvyākulitendriya*. His face was pale and he was sweating, 'He could not control his suffering and (his heart) was laid bare; *na śaśāka manogataṁ taṁ śokaṁ rāghavaḥ sodhum tato vivṛtatām gataḥ*' (2.26.6–8).

Like an ordinary human being, Rama seemed to blame destiny for his fall from grace. He said to Lakshmana:

Stop this coronation ceremony of mine. I am ready to go to the forest to fulfil father's promise. It is destiny that has brought me to this sad plight. Otherwise, mother Kaikeyi who is the daughter of a famous king and who is so well behaved would not have spoken like an uncultured woman in front of father. That which cannot be comprehended by the mind or altered by human effort is called fate. Who can fight fate? None can see the cause of fate; it is only known through its effects. This mysterious, unknowable fate is responsible for happiness and misery, fear and anger, gain and loss, and creation and dissolution (2.22.11–22).

Fatalism attacks humans in the hours of trial and tribulation. Was Rama also afflicted by this common human predicament? We shall address this question later.

Let us now see what happened when Bharata came to Chitrakuta and tried to take Rama back to Ayodhya, though in vain. Rama was determined to fulfil his father's word. When he received the

sad news of his father's demise from Bharata, he was so shocked that he lost consciousness and fell down on the ferny forest floor like a huge tree suddenly chopped down with an axe, *vane paraśunā kṛttastathā bhuvi papāta ha* (2.102.3).

It is perhaps for this intensely sensitive heart that Rama captivated the hearts of others very easily. His love was limitless. He was no clan-conscious king. Irrespective of caste or clan, he could embrace all and become one with them. As Rama, along with Sita and Lakshmana, reached the banks of the Ganga, he received the cordial hospitality of Guha, a chieftain of a local tribe. Guha was so captivated by the friendship of Rama, of the famed clan of Raghu, that he remained awake throughout the night to guard his sleep. He said to Lakshmana: 'We can bear all types of sufferings for his sake. We shall remain awake through these hours of tribulation for his sake. I tell you in the name of truth that there is none on earth dearer to me than Rama' (2.51.3, 4).

It is also evident from the joy he expressed to his brother that Rama knew his dear Hanuman at first sight. And when he met Rama for the first time, Sugriva expressed his feelings guilelessly: 'I have heard of you from Hanuman. You adhere to righteousness; you are valorous and dear to all. I am a humble monkey (a forest dweller). Lord, I am blessed that you have asked for my friendship. I am extending my hand to you. If you so wish, please join your hand with mine and cement our alliance, *grhyatām pāṇinā pāṇirmayādā badhyatām dhruvā*' (4.5.12).

The pathos of human existence, however, has found its deepest expression in Rama's inconsolable lament after Sita's abduction by the demon king Ravana. Seeing Lakshmana approach him without Sita, he seemed to foresee a great disaster befalling her. He scolded his brother for leaving Sita alone in the demon-infested forest. He was terror-stricken on seeing the hermitage deserted. Perhaps, she has gone to fetch water or to pluck flowers, Rama thought. He searched for her everywhere, but in vain. Terror seized his heart and his mind was in a frenzy; filled with terrible grief, he started asking mountains, brooks, trees, and plants the whereabouts of Sita: 'O

dear Kadamba tree! She loved your flowers! Have you seen her? O Bilva! O Arjuna! Have you seen my beloved? Tell me if she is living! O Ashoka, kindly remove my śoka (grief) by telling me her whereabouts! O Karnika, flowers have decorated your branches; tell me if you have seen my soft-spoken, lotus-eyed darling who adored these flowers! Bees are buzzing around you, O Kutaja Vanaspati! Surely you know what has befallen her! Then, tell me without fear, don't remain silent! Her eyes were like you—innocent and restless—O deer! Do you know where my chaste wife is? ...'

But the forest did not rustle even a wee bit, as if to conceal the horror of the scene that it had witnessed a while ago. Rama then addressed Sita directly, imagining her to be playing a prank on him by hiding herself behind some flowering shrub: 'There is no need to play such a terrible game, my dear! Please come out; I cannot bear your absence any more. O sweetheart, don't you have compassion in your heart? You never laugh loudly, you are always self-controlled. Why then are you playing this joke on me?' (3.60-1).

As he searched for Sita through forests and over

hills, his sorrow deepened; he nearly died of anguish. Fortunately, he had Lakshmana by his side to take care of him. When they reached Lake Pampa, he was mad with grief. Valmiki—an artist par excellence—has drawn the picture of the lake in spring-time, painting all the beauties of nature in a timeless landscape. Having placed the mourning Rama at the centre of this vibrant landscape, the poet has created a powerful contrast. The external nature here is full of beauty whereas the human heart is soaked with suffering. Rama expresses his agony to his brother: 'The forest, resonating with the cooing of birds, ignites sorrow in my heart. ... I have lost her ... the lovelorn birds remind me of her. ... The redness of twigs adorned with new leaves and buds is the lustre of spring; to me, at this moment, it is like an all-consuming fire burning me to naught with its myriad tongues of flame' (4.1.29).

Even in the battlefield, this intense sensitivity of heart did not leave him. When the valorous Indrajit put both the brothers in a state of torpor, the whole world was shocked. Rama soon regained his consciousness though, but he was so moved on seeing his brother's condition that he wept bitterly over

The Ramayana has been told to us times without number. Every line of it has been scanned and commented upon minutely, not hundreds, not thousands, but millions of times over. ... Nevertheless, in our mixed human nature, there is a tendency which we nourish to come again and yet again to the story, whether before breakfast or after siesta in the afternoon, or at midnight when it is time to be sleeping. At whatever time we go, to whatever place, whoever the expounder may be, somehow or other there is that in us which helps us to put aside all disturbing illusions, all the things that are calculated to take us away from the environment of the story itself even while our circumstances are such as to cause distraction for the time. ...

I should ask you always to put yourselves in that condition and remain in it whenever you read this great epic. The whole thing is done before you with a set purpose and unless you help that purpose to fulfil itself in you, you read it for nothing. Everything therefore depends on the

way in which you open the book and read it. I take up the book anywhere and read it. To me Rama is not divine. Nevertheless, the illusion is always there, in full force. I can throw myself heart and soul into the very essence of the story. When I read the book, I read that book and do nothing else; my whole mind is devoted to it. A hard-hearted man like me, I read it, and, strange to say, there is not a page which does not bring tears into my eyes! ... Why has it that effect on me? I suppose it is because deep down in my nature, going to strata which perhaps in my waking life I shall never touch, there is a spirit of the utmost reverence and affection for those great characters. Why? Even if Rama and Sita were not of this land but were the hero and heroine in an alien poem, I should feel, probably not so very much affected, but nearly as deeply. Human nature is human nature; whether nurtured here or in another land, it is just the same.

—Adapted from V S Srinivasa Sastri,
Lectures on the Ramayana

Lakshmana's unconscious frame: 'What is the use of regaining Sita after this? I shall give up my body if my brother doesn't come back to life. ...What shall I tell mother Sumitra if I have to return to Ayodhya without him? Fie on me! I have behaved rudely with him. ... O Sugriva, you have helped me as best as you could. Now, leave me alone and turn back (from the battle-field). No human being can overcome fate!' (6.49).

Divinity Personified

Through weeping and wailing, grief and lamentation, Rama is identified with the sufferings of humankind. But that is not enough. He has also to show us through his character a way to get rid of suffering. And for this, we have to go to another dimension of his personality: his divine nature.

Human divinity is that calm centre of poise that is beyond this phenomenal universe, beyond one's body-mind complex, beyond the duality of pain and pleasure or of praise and blame. This calm centre of poise, lying in the depth of our being, remains unassailed amidst all the trials and tribulations of life. It is the ever present, ever awake, ever blissful Atman; in and through it, one knows this universe. The Upanishads proclaim, at their highest pitch, this divinity of the human being. According to the Upanishads, this is *satyasya satyam*, the Truth of truth.

The historico-mythical hero Rama was born in that particular phase of India's history when society, after witnessing the might and glory of the Self-realized sages of the Aranyakas, was struggling to translate their vision into the day-to-day practicalities of life through the implementation of a grand Upanishadic concept: *rta*.

The word *rta* has been used in various contexts throughout the corpus of Vedic literature. Two famous examples are: '*ṛtaṁ pibantau sukr̥tasya loke*; the two drinkers of *ṛta* who have entered into this body' and '*ṛtaṁ vadiṣyāmi satyam vadiṣyāmi*; I shall call you *rta*, I shall call you truth.'³ In his commentary, Acharya Sankara has interpreted this word thus: '*Ṛtaṁ satyam-avaśyamābhāvītvāt karmaphalam*; *rta* is the fruit of actions, it is true because of its inevitability', and '*ṛtaṁ yathāśāstram yathākartavyam*

buddhau supariniścitam-artham; *rta* is an idea fully ascertained by the intellect in accordance with the scriptures and in conformity with practice.'⁴ Often we incorrectly use the two words *rta* and *satya* synonymously. But *satya* or Truth is eternal, whereas *rta*, being the fruit of action, deals with matters that are transient in the ultimate analysis. Faith in its inevitability leads humans to a dispassionate outlook towards the events of their lives. It is, however, not fatalism; it invites humans to participate consciously in the battle of life without being carried away by hopes and aspirations or driven into despair and despondency. One having this attitude towards life and the world may continue to smile or weep, yet even while smiling or weeping will know within oneself the inevitability of one's joy and sorrow, and thus will prepare the mind to realize and manifest one's hidden divine substance.

Looked at from this standpoint, that which seemed to be an attack of fatalism on Rama may have a different significance. In his case, the acceptance of destiny may have been rooted in this philosophy of *rta* as a sure background of one's duties in life, which is remarkably strengthening. Although he behaved like an ordinary human being, somewhere deep within himself he remained aware of that calm centre of poise that held him and carried him unscathed through fiery human predicaments. He expressed this philosophy of his as follows:

*Naivāhaṁ rājyamicchāmi
na sukhaṁ na ca medinīm;
Naiva sarvānimān kāmān
na svargaṁ naiva jīvitam.
Tvāmahaṁ satyamicchāmi
nāṇṛtaṁ puruṣarṣabha.*

I desire neither kingdom nor happiness, neither the earth nor heaven, nor objects of enjoyment. I do not even desire to live. O, Best of Men (Dasharatha), I desire truth and not untruth for you.⁵

Again,

*Asaṁkalpitameveha
yadakasmāt-pravartate;
Nivartyārambhamārabdham
nanu daivasya karma tat.*

*Etayā tattvayā buddhyā
samstabhyātmānamātmanā;
Vyāhate'pyabhiṣeke me
paritāpo na vidyate.*

If such a situation arises, when that which has been well begun is suddenly taken away and that which has never even been thought of falls to the lot of a human being, one must know it to be the play of destiny. By this understanding, I have controlled myself by myself. Though my coronation has suddenly been stopped, I have no grief (2.22.24–5).

Valmiki has left some such suggestive hints for his readers about this aspect of Rama's character, and these have to be carefully unearthed with diligent effort. At the time of their first meeting, Sugriva broke a leafy branch of a sal tree and made Rama sit on it. That was when Rama did not know of Sita's whereabouts and was searching for her. What did Sugriva see in Rama's demeanour? Valmiki says that in Sugriva's eyes he was like the calm ocean, *prasannamudadhīm yathā* (4.8.15). How can an ordinary man remain so calm and composed when his beloved wife has been abducted in the forest? And we have also seen Rama mourning inconsolably for her! The explanation again lies in his philosophy of life.

One day, while gazing at the blue autumnal night sky, Rama was overcome by anxiety for his lost wife and fell unconscious. What was his first thought on regaining consciousness? Valmiki aptly records:

*Sa tu samjñāmapāgamyā
mubhūrtānmatimān punah;
Manahsthāmapī vaidehīm
cintayāmāsa rāghavaḥ.*

He regained consciousness in a few moments, the wise Rama, and started thinking about his beloved wife Vaidehi *who was in his own mind* (4.30.4).

This mysterious statement gives us an insight into Rama's nature. Rama knew full well that the entire phenomenal universe of duality, including his beloved Sita, perceived in and through the mind, is in reality nothing but the mind itself. It is *manodṛśya*, a vision in the mind, which is perceived when the mind acts, and vanishes when the mind is

withdrawn into itself in samadhi or stops functioning, as in deep sleep or in a state of swoon. This view is especially emphasized in the ancient tradition of *Yogavasishtha Ramayana*, which has been ever associated with the character of Rama. Sita too, perhaps, knew this attitude of her noble husband and was established in the same philosophy of life. Even when she was pained at Rama's words that cast doubt on her character at the end of the Lanka war, she reminded him: '*Madadhīnam tu yat-tan-me hṛdayam tvayi vartate*; my heart, which is under my control, is always with you,' 'if my body happened to come in contact with Ravana's, it is destiny that is to be blamed; *yadyaham gātrasamsparsam gatāsmi vivaśā prabho, ... daivam tatra-aparādhyati*' (6.119.8–9).

Was it all then a mock search, and Rama's tears mock tears? Were his actions altogether without purpose? Not at all. Every teardrop he shed for Sita was real, as much as this empirical world of existence is real. But this phenomenal universe, along with all our relationships, although relatively real, vanishes completely in *nirvikalpa samadhi*, and so cannot be said to have an absolute reality. Since Rama was well aware that this entire universe—including his own body and mind and his dear ones—is merely superimposed on Brahman, the Being-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute, and since it does not have an independent existence apart from Brahman, deep within himself he could remain unperturbed, although outwardly he was incessantly engaged in the intensest activity. Moreover, Rama himself told Sita the purpose of his actions: 'I have done what a man should do to protest the insult to his wife. I have both vanquished my enemy and have removed the last trace of dishonour that my ill-luck brought upon me' (6.118.2–3). Again, he thus addressed the fire-god after Sita's ordeal by fire:

O lord, I know that Sita is purity herself, but it is also true that she lived in Ravana's inner apartment for a long period of time. If I were to accept her without putting her through this fiery-test, the world would call me a fool, given to lust. Just as the sun's rays are inseparable from the sun itself, Sita is inseparable from me. Ravana could not have

laid hands on Sita—who is like a blazing fire—even in his mind (2.121.13–18).

Swami Vivekananda's statement about the mental make-up of an ideal karma yogi—'in the midst of intense activity, intense calm'—also characterizes Rama. His mental poise is a manifestation of the tremendous valour that ought to be emulated by one and all. In the battlefield, when he was being repeatedly attacked by the terrible demons, he faced them in a mood of amusement, *sa tam dṛṣṭvā patantam vai prahasya raghunandana* (6.79.45). Before the final attack on Ravana, he announced: 'Today I shall accomplish the greatest task of my life. As long as this creation remains, men and women, gods and demigods, the dwellers of the three worlds will keep narrating the story of this war.' According to Valmiki, he appeared like a huge mountain, unmoved and calm, even when he was being vigorously attacked by the redoubtable Ravana, *mahāgiririvākampyaḥ kākutstho na prakampate* (6.105.4). On the battlefield, he stood like an indefatigable angel on his way to victory.

*Rāmo rāmo rama iti prajānām-abhavan kathāḥ;
Rāmabhūtaṁ jagad-abhūd-rāme rājyaṁ praśāsati.*


With Rama ruling their kingdom, his subjects were always singing his glory, for the entire world was then permeated by Rama (6.131.102).

Encounter with Death

A successful reconciliation between these two apparently contradictory aspects of his character—the human and the divine—is noticeable in Rama's encounter with Kala or Time at the end of the Ramayana. The characterization of Kala is clearly symbolic; he represents the end of Rama's mortal career. He came to Rama as a sage and wanted to talk with him in private. At his behest, Rama promised that anyone who intruded into his private chamber while they were conversing would be done to death. Then the sage revealed his identity to Rama and said: 'I am Time, the all-destroyer. I have come to tell you that the purpose of your in-

carnation has been fulfilled and the period of time you yourself decided to stay on earth is over. Do you wish to spend some more time here?'

Rama answered with a gentle smile: 'I am glad to meet you, Time, the all-destroyer. I was thinking of you just now. I incarnated myself for the good of the three worlds. My mission is fulfilled. I shall return to my abode wherefrom I descended.' At this moment Lakshmana had to interrupt the conversation to inform Rama about the arrival of the irascible sage Durvasa. To keep his word to Kala, Sri Rama had to abandon Lakshmana and order him to enter the waters of the river Sarayu. He too did the same and casting off his mortal body like a disused garment returned to his divine abode.

The episode, as we have said earlier, is allegorical. Death is inevitable in human life. But those who have lived with the consciousness of death throughout their lives, who have prepared themselves to die for a noble cause, who have offered their thoughts and actions, their happiness and suffering in the worship of all beings, who have clearly perceived the inevitability of the fruits of action through such continual offering, and who have discovered the imperishable Atman behind their perishable selves alone can smile at death. And that smile, like an effulgent star in the distant firmament, will keep shedding its lustre for all eternity. 

References

1. Ramayana, 1.1.2–5. The references to the Ramayana in this article are based on *Śrīmad Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇam*, ed. S Kuppaswami Sastri, S Krishna Sastri, S K Padmanabha Sastri, and T V Ramachandra Dikshitar (Madras, 1933) and *Ramayana* (Bengali), trans. Dr Dhyaneswarayan Chakravarti, 2 vols (Kolkata: New Light, 1997). Reference has also been made to Swami Gitananda, *Sri Ramer Anudhyāna* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2002) and M R Yardi, *Epilogue of Ramayana* (Pune: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2001).
2. Ramayana, 6.120.11–12.
3. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.3.1; *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 1.1.1.
4. See *Eight Upanishads*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 1.161, 247.
5. Ramayana, 2.34.47–8.

Valmiki's Sita: A Kaleidoscope of Perceptions

Dr Sumita Roy

NOTWITHSTANDING the recent controversy about the historical authenticity of the Ramayana, this text is one of the most significant and influential foundational narratives that have shaped Indian culture. The events and characters which contribute to its popularity have percolated into the very fabric of Indian life: be it patterns of behaviour, language, metaphors, art and literature, politics, economics, scientific endeavour, customs and traditions, or ideas and ideals. The original version by Valmiki has found innumerable commentators and interpreters, while vernacular versions and folk renderings—both verbal and visual—are also in plenty.

The Ramayana may be read as a text depicting a model of human excellence and perfection in the title role—Rama—but his consort Sita, who combines the ideal of excellence with some endearingly human traits, has been the cynosure of interest and attention through the ages and continues to evoke a wide range of very contradictory opinions.

Traditional Perceptions

To quote Swami Vivekananda in this context: 'You may exhaust the literature of the world that is past, and ... future, before finding another Sita. Sita is unique; that character was depicted once and for all. There may have been several Ramas, perhaps, but never more than one Sita! She is the very type of the true Indian woman, for all the Indian ideals of a perfected woman have grown out of that one life of Sita.'¹

On the one hand, Sita is thus held up as a repository of traits worth emulating, while on the other hand, questions are sometimes raised about the efficacy of her role and attitudes. She is sometimes

venerated as the noblest form of Indian woman and in other versions considered as oppressed, enfeebled, and pitiful.

Examples of changing perceptions on Sita are noted in a seminal volume entitled *Cultural Pasts* which lists the way various philosophical schools influenced the evolution of Sita as a character. The belief that Sita herself was not abducted by Ravana, but it was only her shadow which went with him, is ascribed to the preponderance of Advaita Vedanta philosophy and its doctrine of maya—in fact, Sita walking between Rama and Lakshmana in the days of exile in the forest is often compared to maya, which impedes the individual soul or *jivatman*, symbolized by Lakshmana, from perceiving the Paramatman, that is, Rama. There are also certain versions of her story influenced by the Shakti cult where Sita, with Rama as her charioteer, kills Ravana in single combat. In certain folk traditions, Sita has sometimes been depicted as the daughter of Ravana left in the field by Mandodari, discovered there, and reared by Janaka.²

In the evolution of the position and roles of Indian womanhood, the phase to which Sita belongs spells the status of women in the domestic sphere of activity. In the words of Ramesh Chandra Majumdar: 'The status of women suffered a considerable decline on account of the views and ideals preached in the later Smritis'³, and through a readjustment the role of wife became the ideal. He illustrates this by using the example of Sita: 'Sītā, who is looked upon today as virtue incarnate and the ideal of Indian womanhood, shines principally as the obedient wife, sweetly administering to the needs of her husband in weal and woe, and bowing down to his will. ... Such a sweet, loving

and obedient wife has been held up as the ideal, and has produced a new type of woman in Hindu society' (24–5).

In his inimitable style, Swamiji places her at unassailable heights of glory: 'Sita, purer than purity itself, all patience, and all suffering. She who suffered ... without a murmur, she the ever-chaste and ever-pure wife, she the ideal of the people, the ideal of the gods. ... Sita has gone into the very vitals of our race. She is there in the blood of every Hindu man and woman; we are all the children of Sita. ... The women of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sita, and that is the only way.'⁴

Some Recent Perspectives

But this need not be the only perception, especially in the post-feminist world. One may now find attempts to deconstruct the text from Sita's point of view, like *Sitayana: Sita Sings the Blues*. This is a new twist to the Ramayana from Sita's perspective, by Nina Paley.⁵ Or, for instance, there is Madhu Kishwar's article 'Yes to Sita, No to Ram! The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India', which clinches the point of subversion by saying: 'Ram's rejection of Sita is almost universally condemned while her rejection of him is held up as an example of supreme dignity.'⁶ Also, 'In popular perception Sita's agni pariksha is [seen] ... as an act of supreme defiance on her part' (25). Many similar subversions are to be found while analysing the popular response to Sita's experiences—they largely determine whether she is seen as a negative or a laudatory model.

Scholars of repute from the Western world are also taking a look at the character of Sita. Wendy Doniger's book *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* has a comparative study of Sita and Helen as its very first chapter: 'The Shadow of Sita and the Phantom Helen'. Another example is Catherine Robinson's article 'A Second Sita? Contemporary Issues and Role Models for Indian Women' in *Journal of Beliefs and Values*.⁷ Worthy of note too is *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*.⁸

A Reappraisal

The basic framework of the story by Valmiki brings Sita's character into prominence: a child discovered in a field and reared by Janaka, choosing Rama as her husband in a *swayamvara*, following him to the forest during his exile, courting danger by coveting a golden deer, laying herself open to being abducted by Ravana, waiting to be rescued by Rama and then needing to prove her chastity by passing through fire, returning to Ayodhya with Rama and ruling as his consort before being banished again to Valmiki's forest retreat—where, after giving birth to twin sons she is summoned to court again to stand a test—and finally making a choice to merge herself into the earth from which she took birth.

Mythology considers Sita as the incarnation of Sri or Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, who comes to the transitory plane of existence in order to endure an arduous life that illustrates to humanity the finest of virtues—virtues that need to be inculcated and put into practice. Since the best method of instruction is not by word but by precept, she could do no better than undergo all the travails possible in order to show that the path to perfection is not through avoidance of suffering but in suffering willingly and making the ensuing pain optional. By choosing to suffer but not be weighed down by pain and anguish, the evil which engenders suffering is nullified—this is more purifying and elevating than any ordeal of fire.

The term Sita literally means 'furrow' and her modesty and humility seem to be an offshoot of this name. As Sri Ramakrishna was fond of saying, a raised ground—egoistic temperament—can never accumulate rainwater, but a small hole or furrow collects it easily. Similar is the case with this child found in a furrow: she is not weak in character, as we see in many instances. She is self-effacing and does not believe in putting herself forward unless there is a need; but she is not a silent sufferer by any stretch of imagination. She has a clear idea of self-worth, but this does not lead her to downsize the worth of others. In crucial times she makes her voice heard and attains any goal she sets out to win.

There are many instances in her story where she is vocal and holds an individual opinion, not subject to the will of her husband or any other authority. When Rama tries to dissuade her from accompanying him to the forest for an exile of fourteen long years, she puts forward a sufficient number of logical arguments to disarm him. When she presents the two brothers with weapons before they set out for the forest, she tells them a story whose moral is non-violence: do not display your prowess unless it is justified. When Ravana comes in the guise of a brahmana, she argues with him and refutes his claim. In order to fulfil the cosmic design, however, she does cross the *lakshmana-rekha*, a protective line drawn by Lakshmana, and falls prey to Ravana's evil design. When Hanuman finds her in captivity, she refuses to escape from Lanka secretly by sitting on his back. She would rather wait for Rama to come and rescue her by winning a legitimate battle. After the devastation of the war, when the women who tortured her are at the mercy of the victors, she stops them from being decimated by saying that they had not acted of their own will but had only followed the orders of their ruler. And the only instance where her words are harsh and hurtful is when she forces Lakshmana to go in search of Rama who is pursuing the golden deer, but for this she repents genuinely and lifelong.

The one criterion, above others, that could be used to judge her character would be her interpersonal relationship—the impressions of those who interact with her. Here the attitudes of two persons, Rama and Mandodari, towards her may be cited as illustrations, though the Ramayana abounds in such examples.

That Sita is able to win the love and respect of a person of the stature of Rama—his lifelong loyalty—is a clear indication of her exceptionality. Often he praises her for her wisdom, and till the end he has no doubts about her; it is only to set the standards of public behaviour that he questions her fidelity or speaks unpleasant words after her rescue from Ravana, and again before she finally takes refuge in the womb of Mother Earth. From their first meeting, Rama is bowed down by the responsibility

of proving himself equal to Sita's immense purity. After their wedding, Lakshmana finds Rama sitting in a lonely thoughtful mood and questions him about his distancing himself from the festivities. Rama replies that his new role is much tougher than the lifting of the heavy bow which won him the hand of Sita. 'Will our Ayodhya be able to sustain ... such intense purity as Sita's?' he wonders.⁹

Often in the course of their ensuing life together he, in the public persona of the ideal king, subjects her to trials; but in doing so, the private anima is always drenched in a vale of hidden tears. In the Ramayana it is reiterated that for Rama there can only be one consort, one Sita, whom he cannot replace except, of course, by her inanimate idol made of gold.

The other person whose attitude towards Sita is very significant is Mandodari, the favourite wife of Ravana who possesses virtues and excellences to match even the best of women. Her feelings about Sita, though ambivalent to start with—as, for instance, when she tells Ravana that 'Sita is not my equal or superior, either in birth, beauty, or accomplishments'—becomes laudatory later as she laments the death of her husband—'Sita, who is greater than even Arundhati and Rohini' came down to earth for the destruction of Ravana, she is convinced. Mandodari is never jealous of her husband's frenzied passion for Sita, but warns him again and again to overcome his evil designs on Sita and save himself and his people. Through her wisdom and long austerities, she comes to recognize the divine spirit in Sita and thus achieves a dignity and majesty of her own.

Personal opinions aside, another important way of viewing the various perspectives on a person is analysing the many roles that person plays: Sita excels as a young girl in her role as the dutiful daughter of the saintly Janaka. As a bride she is the custodian of the honour of her husband's family, and this she upholds till the very last part of her life. When Lakshmana leaves her in the forest for her second exile, she has no complaints. Instead she believes that if her staying away from Rama is beneficial to the Raghuvamsha, Raghu's lineage, she is willing to

do so. It is not as though she is not frightened to be in the forest again, this time bereft of the company of her beloved Rama. But to her, duty to the clan is more important than personal prosperity. As a prisoner in the pleasure garden of Ravana, she shows the power of her personality by preventing seduction through a mere blade of grass. In a momentary lapse, she had crossed the line drawn by Lakshmana for her protection; but here her duty as a householder to give alms came in the way of her self-defence. And once she is in the power of Ravana, she does not succumb to any such consideration, fortifying herself with the power of her personality. Sita as a mother is also a mature and impressive role—single-parenting her twin sons who grow up to be valiant, intelligent, and artistic all-rounders.

This is not to say that she is infallible under all circumstances. In many places she appears far from perfect. All the ills of her abduction arise from her coveting a golden deer, in spite of being assured that such a novelty is unnatural. Her haranguing Lakshmana and accusing him of having designs on her virtue do not accord well with her harmonious coexistence with all nature, especially in the long years of exile. But the heat of the moment, her fear for the life of her beloved Rama, and Lakshmana's intractable attitude to her requests seem to culminate in her callous behaviour leading to the catastrophe of her long separation from Rama.

Apart from scholarly analyses, the character of Sita is often expressed in creative and symbolic terms. One such is Swami Vivekananda's explanation of the soul's journey to salvation. In it, Sita represents the *jivatman*. According to him: 'Rama was the Paramatman and Sita was the Jivatman, and each man's or woman's body was the Lanka. ... The Jivatman which was enclosed in the body, or captured in the island of Lanka, always desired to be in affinity with the Paramatman, or Shri Rama. But the Rakshasas would not allow it, and Rakshasas represented certain traits of character.'¹⁰

Elaborating this he continues: 'For instance, Vibhishana represented Sattva Guna; Ravana, Rajas; and Kumbhakarna, Tamas. ... These Gunas

keep back Sita, or Jivatman, which is in the body, or Lanka, from joining Paramatman or Rama. ... [She] receives a visit from Hanuman, the Guru or divine teacher, who shows her the Lord's ring, which is Brahma-Jnana, the supreme wisdom that destroys all illusions; and thus Sita finds the way to be at one with Shri Rama' (ibid.).

Contemporary Currency

Before concluding, it would be relevant to see the currency of Sita in today's world. To get an accurate and balanced perspective, the first step is to go beyond the rigid lines of either putting her on a pedestal as the ideal woman for all times and climes or denigrating her as a mere patriarchal tool for ensuring submissiveness in women. Those who advocate gender 'equality' are gradually coming to realize that oranges need never be equated with apples, because both have their own inviolable place in the natural scheme of things.

Without attempting this kind of unequal equality, it can be said that Sita in no way appears 'inferior' to any other character in the epic. She has the necessary confidence to live a life of dignity in the most trying of circumstances. Her confidence is not manifest through any form of aggressiveness. In fact, her self-control and silence are clearer indications of her faith in herself than what was possible through any overt fierce display of hostility.

Sita in captivity

ABANINDRA NATH TAGORE



The emotional response evoked by the character of Sita also determines many perceptions. Rarely does she appeal to the reader as an object of pity. Her travails bring forth admiration, her suffering is participated in. Her rite of passage through fire and her subsequent exile to stop the tongues from wagging are more social critiques than any comment on the weakness or helplessness of women. Nowhere is she seen embittered by a life of torment—she infuses love for the absent father in her sons' hearts, to cite just one instance. She does experience intense grief throughout her life, but this grief strengthens her rather than incapacitating her. Her emotional intelligence—to recognize, respect, and regulate emotions—is a trait which needs to be given maximum currency in the world of today, which seems to be fast losing its emotional balance.

The concept of the shadow of Sita being kidnapped, being made to undergo the rite of purification by fire, and then being united with Rama when her real form was never far removed from him has had a hold on the popular imagination for long and has many ethical ramifications. As incarnations of the all-powerful divine, it is obvious that Rama and Sita had other agenda than the obvious one of being the overt and covert instruments for killing Ravana. The establishment of contextual ethics being one of their major tasks, the role of Sita takes on added significance. To begin with, she is the recipient of guidance about proper behaviour in various stations of life: conformity as a child, adaptability as a daughter going to the house of her new husband, and so on. Later, in spite of his deep devotion to Sita, Rama makes her the instrument for communicating various ethical norms as a part of his efforts to establish *ramarajya*—the ideal, utopian state.

Even discounting the historical verifiability, a milieu which could creatively and imaginatively fashion a character such as Sita must have responded to women in a way vastly different from the present popular conceptions that women are the 'other', or are mere shadows with no individuality but in and through the men in their lives. Sita's character thus reiterates the veneration accorded to women in In-

dian culture as well as their significant participation in all discourses of life, public and private, along with men; the empowerment wrested by revolution or demanded violently, clearly seems to have been hers by right. The effacement which women chose to adopt on many occasions was often by a free exercise of volition and not compulsion or coercion. All these aspects make the interpretation of Sita's multifaceted character very complex. To say that she was the sole arbiter of her own life would be as much of a fallacy as to consider her the bonded slave of the men in her life and the prevalent patriarchal tradition.

Does Sita then serve as a model—either universal or local—for women of today? This is a difficult question to answer, because demarcating such clear centres and margins in a postmodern environment seems an anathema. There is no doubt that culture-specificity marks a debate of this nature—which often remains inconclusive. The need of the hour seems to be an attempt at contemporizing the values and virtues she exemplifies and choosing to hone in our consciousness those that seem applicable today.



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Hanuman: Valour, Wisdom, Humility, and Devotion

A P N Pankaj

*Parākramotsāha-mati-pratāpa-sauśīlya-
mādhurya-nayānayaśca;
Gāmbhīrya-cāturya-suvīrya-dhairya-
hanūmataḥ ko'bhyadhiko'sti loke.*

Who, in the world, is superior to Hanuman in valour, energy, intelligence, prowess, character, charm, discernment, composure, dexterity, vigour, and fortitude?¹

BLESSING Valmiki, the *ādikavi* (first or foremost among poets) Brahma, the Creator, had prophesied that ‘as long as mountains stand on earth and rivers flowed, the story of Ramayana (narrated by Valmiki) would remain current in all the worlds’: *Yāvat-sthāsyanti girayaḥ saritaśca mahītale; Tāvad-rāmāyaṇakathā lokeṣu pracariṣyati* (1.2.36–7).

Today, ages later, this story abides; and as its integral part lives Hanuman and his legend, actualizing the boon that he had sought from Sri Rama: ‘I am never satisfied with repeating thy name. Therefore, I wish to remain always on this earth repeating thy name. May this body of mine remain as long as thy name is remembered in this world.’² So, Hanuman lives incognito among us as one of the eight *cirañjīvins*³, immortals, listening to *rāmakathā*, the story of Rama, wherever it is sung.

Down the millennia, the story of Ramayana and of Hanuman has continued to flow and flower in a myriad forms—through epics and Upanishads, Itihasas and Puranas, legend and folklore, history and hearsay; through paintings, dance forms, and folk art; through feature films and animations; in small villages as well as busy metros; in artless rural *rāmīlās* and sophisticated urban stage plays; in temples, auditoria, and improvised *paṇḍāls*; through the narrations of simple storytellers, professional

kathāvāchakas, erudite pandits, spiritual leaders, and even child prodigies; in India, Cambodia, Thailand, Java, Sumatra, Bali, Myanmar, Mauritius, Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, Siberia, Mongolia, Malaysia, and lately, the West—and people listen: men, women, and children; the illiterate and the learned, sceptics as well as sentimental devotees. Brahma’s blessings could not have been truer.

Somewhere in this crowd—perhaps among the simplest folks, listening reverentially to the Ramayana—sits Hanuman: his head bent, folded hands raised to the forehead in salutation, and eyes moist with tears of love for Rama.

Origin and Epithets

According to some versions of the Ramayana, Hanuman was born with bejewelled earrings.⁴ He is also described as being born with *mauñjī-mekhalā*, a three-string girdle of *muñja* grass. In Tulsidas’s *Hanuman Chalisa*, Hanuman is ‘adorned with earrings, holy thread, and *muñja*’.

Hanu means ‘chin’ and the suffix *mat* denotes ‘possession’, and implicitly ‘excellence’ or ‘superiority’, *atiśāyana*. ‘Hanuman’ would thus mean ‘the one with excellent chin’. According to Sanskrit lexicographers, letters in this name denote the following: *ha*, Brahma, Shiva, bliss, sky, water; *nu*, worship, praise; *mā*, Lakshmi, Vishnu; and *na*, heroic strength. The name would thus suggest the presence of the attributes and distinctive characteristics of these deities and elements—all in one person.

Hanuman has several other appellations. He is Anjaneya, the son of Anjana; as the *aurasa* (born of oneself) child of the wind god, he is Maruti or Pavanasuta, and as the *kṣetrajā* (wife’s offspring by a duly appointed person) son of Kesari—one of the

senior leaders of the monkey army—he is Kesari-nandana.⁵ Punjikasthala, an apsara, was born as a monkey due to Brihaspati's curse. Vayu, the wind god told her: 'You would have a strong and intelligent son because I have touched you with my mind (*manasāsmi gataḥ*). He would be full of courage, energy, strength, and valour (*mahā-sattvo mahā-tejā mahā-bala-parākrama*), and my equal in flying and leaping.'⁶

Bhavabhuti, in his *Mahaviracharita*, and Bhatti, in his *Bhattikavya*, give 'Vrishakapi' as one of Hanuman's names. In Nilakantha's *Mantra Ramayana*—a treatise interpreting several Vedic mantras as alluding to the Ramayana story—Hanuman finds mention. Nilakantha believes that Vrishakapi, the 'man-ape' associated with Indra and Indrani in the Rig Veda, is none other than Hanuman.⁷ In Hanuman's figure, says A A MacDonnell, 'perhaps survives a reminiscence of Indra's alliance with the Maruts in his conflict with Vṛtra and of the god Saramā who, as Indra's messenger, crosses the waters of the Rasā and tracks the cows. Saramā recurs as the name of a demoness [in Rāmāyaṇa] who consoles Sītā in her captivity. The name of Hanumat being Sanskrit, the character is probably not borrowed from the aborigines.'⁸

Camille Bulcke, the Belgian missionary and author of *Ramkatha*, disagrees: 'In the Vedic literature, Hanuman is not mentioned anywhere. ... The word Hanuman is probably the Sanskrit version of a Dravidian word and it means "man-monkey".'⁹ Bulcke also mentions the names of various family lines and castes of aborigines in the Chota Nagpur and Singhbhum regions of Central India who trace their lineage to Hanuman. According to him, the name 'Hanuman' is a Sanskrit synonym of *āṇa-mandi* or *āṇa-mānti*, *āṇa* meaning man and *manda*, monkey (92). Swami Vivekananda says, 'By the "monkeys" and "demons" are meant the aborigines of South India.'¹⁰ In the Buddhist Jatakas, though Hanuman is not mentioned by name, allusions to him as a monkey are aplenty, and reference to the bodhisattva's incarnation as a colossal monkey in the 'Mahakapi Jataka' clearly

reminds us of Hanuman.¹¹ The *Shunya Purana*, an eleventh-century Buddhist text by Ramai Pandit, records that 'when Madana, wife of Harisha Chandra, entered the Buddhist fold, she saw Hanuman protecting the southern gate of the shrine.' 'Eventually, the popularity of Hanuman which he gained for his performance in *Ramayana* made the Buddhists patronise him' (ibid.).

In the Jain scriptures, Hanuman is the biological son of Anjana, daughter of Mahendra, the king of Mahendrapur. She is married to Pavananjaya. Hanuman is the lord of Vajrakuta, a part of Manushottara Mountain. 'He fell from an aerial chariot on a hill which was smashed into smithereens. He thus earned the sobriquet "Sri-shaila". He rendered yeoman's service to Rama in the latter's war with Ravana.'¹²

In the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, Hanuman tells Angada: 'We are all celestial attendants of Lord Vishnu in Vaikuntha [Vishnu's celestial abode]. When he incarnated himself as man, we too descended as *vānaras* (monkeys).'¹³ In the Oriya *Rasavinoda* of Dinakrishnadasa, the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva together appears in the form of Hanuman. Goswami Tulsidas—'the greatest of all poets who wrote in the language of the people'¹⁴—pays obeisance to Hanuman as 'Mahadeva', 'Kapali', 'Rudravatara', 'Vanarakara-vigraha Purari', which are also appellations of Shiva or Rudra.¹⁵ In a number of Puranas—the *Skanda*, *Bhagavata*, *Narada*, and *Brihaddharma* Puranas, for instance—Hanuman has been depicted as Shiva, or his partial incarnation, or as Kapalin, the eleventh Rudra. In the Bengali *Krittivasa Ramayana*, Sita realizes that Hanuman is Shiva's incarnation while serving him food.¹⁶

In *Kamba Ramayana* too, Hanuman has been described as an incarnation of Rudra.¹⁷ The *Ananda Ramayana*, the *Tattvasangraha Ramayana*, and Tulsidas's *Hanuman Bahuka* and *Dohavali* also say so. In some versions of the Ramayana Hanuman has been mentioned as Vishnu's son. Elsewhere—in the *Ramakatha* from Indonesia, for instance—he is Rama's son.

These different views notwithstanding, it is un-

deniable that both Sita and Rama had great love for Hanuman and openly expressed their gratitude for his services. In the *Ramcharitmanas*, Sita says:

*Ajara amara gunanidhi suta bobu;
Karahun bahuta raghunayaka chhobu.*

May you never grow old or die, my son; be a storehouse of virtue, and may Raghunatha be most gracious unto you.

And Rama affirms:

*Sunu suta tohi urina main nahin;
Dekheun kari bichara mana mahin.*

On reflection, my son, I have come to the conclusion that I can never repay the debt I owe you.¹⁸

It was mentioned earlier that Hanuman is the son of Vayu from Anjana, hence he is called 'Vayuputra'. Valmiki and the succeeding narrators also call him by other names with identical meanings: Pavana-suta, Marutatmaja, Gandhavahatmaja, and so on. In South India people especially love to address Hanuman as Anjaneya. In his *Hanuman Chalisa*, Tulsi-das addresses him as Shankara Suvana, son of Shiva; Kesarinandana, the joy of Kesari; Anjaniputra, Anjani's son; and Pavanasuta, son of the Wind.

As a child Hanuman was quite a prankster. We have seen that, according to a Jain scripture, when he fell on a rock, it was the rock that was damaged. Valmiki tells the story differently, twice in fact—each with some variations. The first is a narration by Jambavan to Hanuman and the second by Agastya to Rama: 'As a baby, crying out of hunger when his mother was away, he happened to see the rising sun, like a mass of red hibiscus. Taking it to be fruit, the baby—as brilliant as the rising sun—leapt into space to catch the sun and went up hundreds of miles without bothering about the unbearable heat of the fireball above. The Sun too, knowing him to be but a baby, was mild on him. ... Indra was angry with Hanuman for his audacity, and striding on his elephant, Airavata, struck him with his thunderbolt, *vajra*. He fell down (on the Udaya Mountain) and broke his left chin.' In Agastya's version of the story, the damage was greater. Hanuman was al-

most dead. Vayu got very angry and stopped blowing. There was commotion in the three worlds. Led by Brahma, gods, humans, and demons approached Vayu with a request to resume his function. Brahma revived Hanuman by his touch. The wind god, now appeased, started blowing again. However, since Hanuman's chin was broken, and he recovered from this injury, he got the name 'Hanuman'. Meanwhile, at Brahma's behest, the gods gave him a number of blessings. These included the boons of immortality, immunity against diseases as well as various powerful celestial weapons, matchless strength, and wisdom. Surya, the sun god, offered to teach him on his attaining the age for studentship.¹⁹

There is another episode about his un-channelled energies as a child. He was always up to some mischief. This greatly disturbed the rishis engaged in austerities. They cursed him that he would forget about his strength and would remember it only when reminded by someone (7.36.28–36). Hence, on the eve of his leaping across the sea to find Sita's whereabouts, Jambavan had to remind him of his strength.

In another story from his childhood, Shiva comes to Ayodhya in the guise of a juggler along with Hanuman to see the child Rama. Rama takes a fancy to the monkey and befriends him. So Shiva leaves him with Rama. After spending some years there, Hanuman goes to Kishkindha, as advised by Rama.²⁰

The sun god had offered to become Hanuman's tutor. When the latter approached him, Surya put a condition. Since Surya had to keep moving, Hanuman would have to keep walking with his face towards the Sun. Hanuman accepted the condition. With his book open in his hands, his eyes fixed on the Sun, Hanuman kept walking backwards in the sky, synchronizing his steps with the Sun's movement. In this way, he mastered grammar and other academic disciplines.²¹

A Versatile Genius

In *Sri Sri Rama Rasayana*, a Bengali version of the Ramayana, we find that Hanuman learnt the Shastras

from Rama himself. In the *Muktika Upanishad*, we see Rama teaching him Vedanta and explaining him the different types of mukti. In *Rama-rahasya Upanishad*, we have him in a teacher's role. In the Mahabharata, Hanuman discourses Bhima on the characteristics of the four *varnas*, and the duties of the king and the people.²² In his *Vinay Patrika*, Tulsi-das salutes him as '*Vedantavid, vividha-vidya-vishada, veda-vedangavid, brahmavadi*; knower of Vedanta, proficient in various sciences, authority on the Vedas and their auxiliaries, and an expounder of the lore of Brahman.'²³ He is also 'a *kalādhara* [master of arts] par excellence'—a renowned dancer and singer, and a master musician, *saṅgitācārya*. According to Kalandaji, a critic of *Saṅgita Parijata*, a work based on Hanuman's theory of music, there are three principal exponents of music: Hanuman, Shardula, and Kahala, Shiva being the lord of music.²⁴ Bulcke enumerates seventeen adjectives used by Valmiki and others to eulogize Hanuman's intellectual genius.²⁵

On completing his education with Surya, Hanuman insisted on offering his *guru-dakṣiṇā*, the preceptor's fee. Surya asked him to serve Sugriva, his son, who was not as strong and powerful as Bali, the chief of the *vanaras*. This brought Hanuman into Sugriva's service.

Meeting Rama proved to be the high point of Hanuman's career. This was also a turning point in both their lives. According to the *Kamba Ramayana*, Hanuman displayed his power to Rama by expanding his body into a colossal form; and according to the evidence of the *Adbhuta Ramayana*, Rama showed him his Vishnu form in turn. In the *Valmiki Ramayana*, however, Hanuman meets Rama in the foothills of Mount Rishyamuka, disguised as a mendicant at the behest of Sugriva. He had been sent to find out what brought the brothers there and, if they were not Bali's allies, to offer them Sugriva's hand of friendship. During this meeting, Rama observes Hanuman's unusual abilities and tells Lakshmana:

He is the counsellor of the *vanara* king Sugriva, and has approached me at his behest. ... He has mastery over language. ... It is impossible for anyone to converse like him without attaining com-

mand over the Rig, Yajur, and Sama Vedas. His proficiency in grammar is thorough; he has studied it many times over. And though he has spoken so much, he has not uttered a single word out of place or irrelevant to the context. There was no grimace on his face, eyes, forehead, or brow, nor any inappropriate gesture from any other part of his body. His diction is neither expansive nor elliptical, neither too slow nor too fast. The thoughts in his heart, escaping his throat, are expressed in a medium tone. His language is cultured, attractive, and beatific, and his manner, neither gushing nor tardy. ... How can the objectives of a king, who does not have such an illustrious emissary, ever be accomplished?²⁶

Erudition apart, Hanuman has great sensitivity and excellent communication skills. While speaking with Rama and Lakshmana, he uses flawless Sanskrit; but he decides against it when he has to introduce himself to Sita in the Ashokavana. He deliberates: 'I am a monkey, and if I speak Sanskrit as the high-bred twice-born do, she may be scared, taking me to be Ravana in a fresh disguise. How can a monkey speak with her except in a dialect?' He therefore, 'spoke in a language which must have been the ordinary spoken tongue (*mānuṣīm-ihā sanskritām*) in either Kosala or Mithila'.²⁷ In counselling Sugriva, when the latter becomes negligent in his duty towards Rama; in advising Angada, when he is contemplating suicide and nursing thoughts of revolt against Sugriva; in dealing with Mount Mainaka, and the demonesses Surasa and Simhika while crossing the ocean; and in teaching a lesson to Lankini, or Lanka-lakshmi, the presiding demoness of Lanka, at the city's threshold, Hanuman's tact, tactical skills, and physical strength are on display.

The excellence of his character is also noteworthy. In the course of his search for Sita, when he walks into Ravana's harem and sees his mistresses in various states of undress, he is filled with contrition for invading their privacy. His spiritual wisdom and diplomatic skills are simultaneously expressed in his discourse to Ravana in the latter's court. In the Ashokavana, when he finds Sita in a miserable

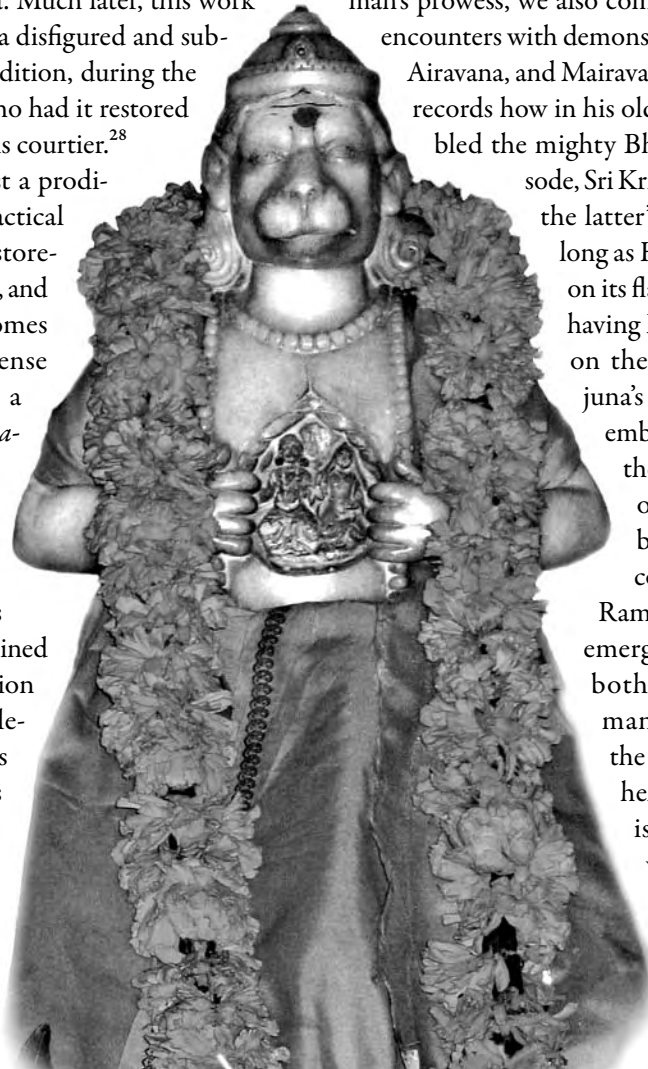
condition—being threatened by Ravana and the attending demonesses—his reaction of empathic pain on the one hand and his deliberation over the pros and cons of the next course of action highlight both his humanness and decision-making abilities.

In recounting the events of Rama's life to Janaki in the Ashokavana and to Bharata in Ayodhya, Hanuman becomes the first narrator of Ramayana. Legend also has it that the Sanskrit drama *Mahanataka* or *Hanuman-nataka* was authored by Hanuman and inscribed by him on the rocks of a mountain. When Valmiki read it, he was both delighted and worried: delighted because of the sheer exquisiteness of the work and worried because he felt that his Ramayana might lose its pre-eminent status once people read *Mahanataka*. On coming to know of Valmiki's apprehension, Hanuman threw those rocks into the sea. Much later, this work was retrieved, albeit in a disfigured and substantially damaged condition, during the reign of King Bhoja, who had it restored by Damodar Mishra, his courtier.²⁸

Hanuman is not just a prodigious intellect or a practical mind; he is a virtual storehouse of strength, valour, and versatility. Once he comes to know of his immense potential, he rises like a mountain of gold (*kanaka-bhūḍharākāra*), resolves to fulfil the mission assigned to him, and 'like the unfailing arrow from Rama's bow, shoots across the ocean', determined not to rest till his mission is accomplished. Single-handed, he devastates Ashokavana, decimates the demon-brigade, and kills their commander Aksha, the son of Ravana. Although blessed

with Brahma's boon that his missiles would do him no harm, out of respect for the Creator, he allows himself to be chained by the Brahmastra thrown at him by Indrajit. Unfazed, he appears before Ravana in his court and interacts with him in the presence of his commanders and courtiers. Neither is he perturbed when his tail is set ablaze; instead, he 'breaks into laughter, and roars as he touches the sky'. He earns the gratitude of practically all the major characters on Rama's side—Sugriva, Vibhishana, Lakshmana, and Vaidehi. Rama himself declared his indebtedness to him more than once: 'The task accomplished by you is difficult even for the mighty gods to achieve. I do not know how to repay my debt to you. I offer you all that is mine'; saying so Rama held Hanuman in tight embrace.²⁹

Besides the major battle where we see Hanuman's prowess, we also come across his amazing encounters with demons like Mahiravana and Airavana, and Mairavana. The Mahabharata records how in his old age Hanuman humbled the mighty Bhima. In another episode, Sri Krishna tells Arjuna that the latter's chariot was safe as long as Hanuman was resting on its flag; Kapidhvaja—one having Hanuman as insignia on the flag—is one of Arjuna's many epithets. 'The emblem of Hanuman on the flag of Arjuna is another sign of victory because Hanuman cooperated with Lord Rama ... and Lord Rama emerged victorious. Now both Rama and Hanuman were present on the chariot of Arjuna to help him. Lord Krishna is Rama himself and wherever Lord Rama is his eternal servitor Hanuman and



His consort Sita, the goddess of fortune (Lakshmi), are present. Therefore Arjuna had no cause to fear any enemy whatsoever.³⁰

Bulcke records nearly seventy adjectives that have been used to eulogize Hanuman's valour and strength in the *Valmiki Ramayana* and other texts.³¹

Mahavira: An Ideal

Two pictures of Hanuman come to our mind, almost simultaneously. In one, we see him 'with hands folded together in the anjali pose, expression on the face, one of humility and devotion, kneeling on one leg as if receiving benediction from his lord and master Rama';³² and the other: colossus like, with mace in one hand and the Sanjivani hill in the other, striding across the heavens. In Rajasthani paintings, artists celebrate 'his humanness, devotion, and humility' (35); in Mughal art, 'his deeds marked him as heroic, intelligent, dauntless, enterprising, kind, humble and devout servitor ... The most enchanting and dynamic representation of Hanuman is to be seen in folk style illustrations in small-size manuscripts' (33, 38).

The mighty Hanuman—with phenomenal physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual powers—is yet a picture of humility in Rama's presence. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna, he is established in the belief that 'as long as I have the feeling of "I", I see that Thou art the whole and I am a part; Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant. But when, O Rāma, I have the knowledge of Truth, then I realize that Thou art I, and I am Thou.'³³ This is not just an abstract or intellectual realization. For Ramakrishna, who, taking Hanuman as his ideal, had himself practised *dāśya sādhanā*—spiritual practice with the attitude of a servant—Hanuman lives this realization in his practical life. Ramakrishna says, 'Hanuman kept the "servant ego" after realizing God in both His Personal and His Impersonal aspects. He thought of himself as the servant of God.' This is the 'ego of Devotion' (500). Though having all the *siddhis* or supernatural powers in his possession, he uses them only to accomplish *rāma-kārya*, Rama's mission.

Swami Vivekananda says:

As on the one hand Hanuman represents the ideal of service, so on the other he represents leonine courage, striking the whole world with awe. He has not the least hesitation in sacrificing his life for the good of Rama. A supreme indifference to everything except the service of Rama, even to the attainment of the status of Brahma and Shiva, the great World-gods! Only the carrying out of Sri Rama's best [behest] is the one vow of his life! Such whole hearted devotion is wanted.³⁴

And then, Vivekananda adds: 'The Damaru and horn have to be sounded, drums are to be beaten so as to raise the deep and martial notes, and with "Mahavira [Hanuman]" "Mahavira" on your lips ... the quarters are to be reverberated' (233).

If, as Vivekananda wanted, our young men must possess 'muscles of iron and nerves of steel', there could be no better role-model than Hanuman, the Vajranga (or Bajranga): having a frame as hard as the thunderbolt.

Hanuman is also the epitome of wisdom, both mundane and spiritual. As Rama's messenger, Hanuman also believes that the best envoy is one who, after having accomplished the assigned mission, does an extra task, not contrary to the original assignment.³⁵ Thus, while in Lanka, not only does he trace Sita's whereabouts, he also warns Ravana and tries to persuade him to give up his evil designs, discovers Vibhishana as a potential ally, and inflicts considerable damage on the lives, property, and morale of the *rakshasas*.

In the role of Sugriva's minister, Hanuman tries diplomatically to bring him back to his senses when he, drunk with power and passion, forgets his duty to Rama. It was Hanuman who, in the first place, introduced Sugriva to Rama. He counselled Vibhishana as a friend and, in the face of opposition from Sugriva and others, facilitated Vibhishana's refuge in Rama. In doing so, Hanuman acts as both Sugriva's and Vibhishana's guru. Vivekananda says:

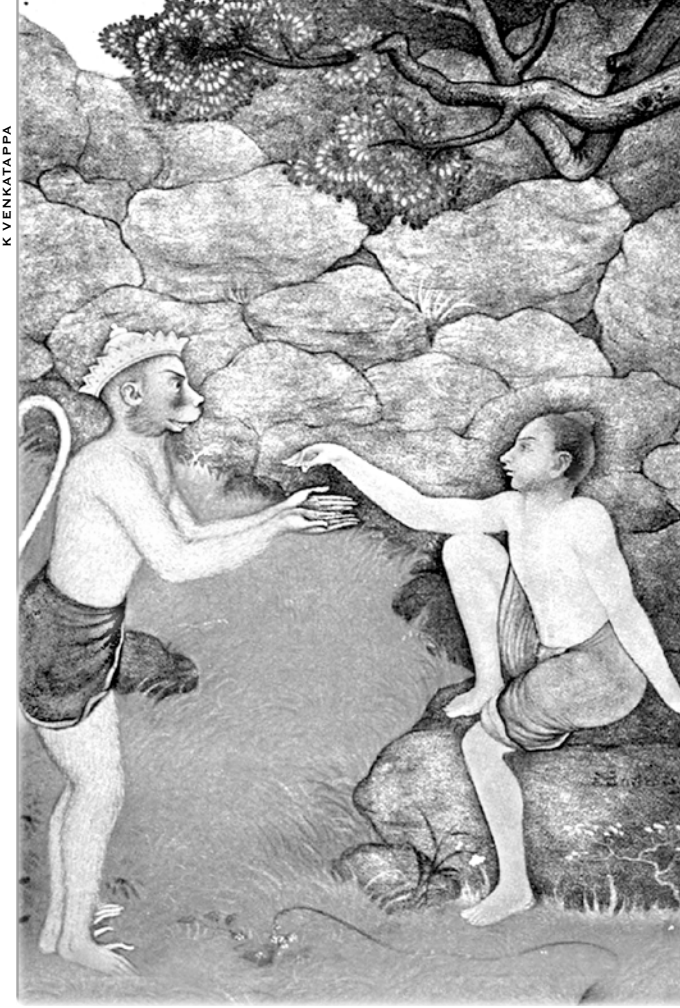
Shri Rama was the Paramatman ... Sita was the Jivatman, and each man's or woman's body was the Lanka. ... Sita, thus imprisoned and trying to

unite with her Lord, receives a visit from Hanuman, the Guru or divine teacher, who shows her the Lord's ring, which is Brahma-Jnana, the supreme wisdom that destroys all illusions; and thus Sita finds the way to be at one with Shri Rama, or, in other words, the Jivatman finds itself one with the Paramatman (5.415).

Though Hanuman is content with remaining a servant, he has become a cult figure. Today he is the most celebrated 'devotee-deity' of India. Sita had blessed him thus: 'People will worship your image to get out of trouble—in towns, gardens, cities, villages, homes, cow-sheds, pathways, temples, forests, and places of pilgrimage; on hills, near rivers and ponds; in orchards and basil-clusters, under bo and banyan trees. Just by remembering your name, they would succeed in warding off evil spirits.'³⁶

It is well known that Tulsidas would recite the *Hanuman Babuka* to cure himself of his serious arm ailment; and to ward off calamities, he would chant the 'Sankata-mochana-stotra'. Today these and the *Hanuman Chalisa* are chanted in temples and the homes of millions of Hindus in India and abroad, every morning and evening. 'Hanuman, the monkey god and devotee of Rama, grants us the power of higher life-force (Prana) that elevates the mind and increases our devotion.'³⁷

The worship of Hanuman cuts across sects and communities: 'Śrī Vaiṣṇavas worship Garuḍa and Hanumān alike as the mounts of Viṣṇu. ... Hanumān is also a manifestation of śakti (śaktirūpa). The tāntrikas worship one-headed, five-headed and eleven-headed Hanumān for spiritual attainment.'³⁸ As incarnation of Shiva or the eleventh Rudra, he is worshipped by the Shaivas. Madhvacharya, the founder of the Dvaita school of Vaishnava philosophy, called himself the incarnation of Hanuman. 'His [Hanuman's] image can be seen repeated in stone carvings, masks, ballet performances and the minor arts of Bali, Java, Thailand etc. where the Ramayana is a living force till today' (20-1).³⁹ 'The worship of the Hindu-deities—primarily Gaṇeśa, Skanda, Sarasvati, the



Rama sending his signet ring to Sita

Mothers as also Bhairon and Hanumān—has got so much importance in the Jainism of today that the cult of the Tirthaṅkaras has strongly receded behind it.'⁴⁰ 'It is certain, at all events, that none of the larger villages of India is without its image of the monkey-king Hanumat and that monkeys are swarming in many temples and are treated with great forbearance and love.'⁴¹

In the corporate world, human-resource experts deliberate on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes, demanded by the different jobs in their respective organizations. We began this essay with the sage Agastya enumerating eleven attributes of excellence, and then affirming that there could be no better example than Hanuman of a person in whom all of these are well integrated.

We may conclude this article with an earlier episode from the 'Yuddha Kanda':

Ramachandra gave Sita a pearl necklace, glittering like the moonbeams, along with bright garments and beautiful ornaments. Sita looked at them, and then gave them to Hanuman. Next, removing her own necklace she looked repeatedly at the assembled *vanaras* as well as at her husband. Rama, understanding her intent, told her to give that to the one with whom she was most pleased. Sita gave the necklace to Pavanaputra, who was possessed of [such 'pearl-like' attributes as] energy, fortitude, glory, dexterity, efficacy, humility, statesmanship, valour, prowess, and discernment. Hanuman wore the necklace and shone like a mountain lighted up by the moonbeams.'⁴²

*Rāmāyaṇa-mahāmālā-ratnam
vande'nīlātmajam.*

Our obeisance to the son of the Wind, a veritable jewel in the great necklace that is the Ramayana. ❧

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Manimekalai: Physician to the Hungry

Dr Prema Nandakumar

TWO thousand years ago, Tamil Nadu had a very strong Buddhist presence. The message of Buddha, along with its call for compassion, seems to have reached the Tamil people soon after Buddha's *parinirvana*. Going by the literary and epigraphic evidence of those times, Buddhism had become a contender for the common people's attention alongside the Vedic religion and indigenous deities. The name of Ilambodhiyar, the 'young Buddhist', one of whose poems is found in the Tamil Sangam anthology *Natrinaï*, suggests the presence of Buddhism.

The early Tamil Buddhists established schools to spread literacy and teach the importance of high morality to the common people. A *Purananuru* verse by Avvaiyar is seen as reflecting Buddhist thought:

O earth! You may be cultivable land,
Or forest, or ravine, or upland.
Where there are good people
You are good. Yourself remain amoral.¹

By the early centuries of the first millennium, Buddhism had become an institutionalized religion and there were huge and rich viharas in Tamil Nadu. *Pattinappalai* by Kadiyalur Rudrankannanar refers to the Buddhist viharas in Kaveri-p-pombattinam (Pumpuhar), which was the residence of the Buddhist monks:

In the yards with mangers, where big bulls may feed,
Are cool little pools. From the dense-leaved,
low-branched groves
Where the monks have their cells, the koel with
its big black hens
Retreats, sick from the fragrant smoke of
oblations
Made by hermits with matted hair ...²

While tapasya was for the renunciants, householders carried on worship with flowers and scented smoke. *Madurai-k-kanji* has painted a beautiful scenario of women and children worshipping in the Buddhist viharas:

Young women held fast to themselves
Little children ornamented with jewels
So they will not be lost; kissing them
And holding firmly their hands
That appeared like pollen-rich lotus buds,
They stood there, carrying flowers for worship,
And scented smoke, singing the glory
Of their Lord in that Buddha Vihara ...

Pazhichuthal, reciting or singing, was important too for rituals. Expounding Buddhist philosophy was another major religious activity of the Buddhists. Other ventures of the early Buddhists included building of hospitals and looking after the marginalized and the sick; and this was reflected in the contemporary literature. All this together contributed to the rich texture of ancient Tamil literature which blossomed into the marvellous epic, *Manimekalai*.

Manimekalai and *Silappatikaram* are considered the twin epics of ancient Tamil literature. These epics are also valuable historical documents, and the statements therein are being corroborated by archaeological finds. Till a tsunami (*katar-kol*) destroyed it, the city of Pumpuhar had many viharas and an *upavana*, large garden, with a crystal temple enshrining an image of Buddha's feet. *Manimekalai* contains Buddhist prayers, sung in these viharas, which evoke compassion for other human beings. For instance, this is Sutamati:

Our Lord, self-taught, the essence of faultless things,

Incarnating in nature's several forms,
 Always living for the good of others,
 Never for himself: for the good of the world
 His penance, with the idea of Dharma.
 Hence his rolling the wheel of Dharma rays.
 He won victory over desire; Buddha's feet
 Shall I praise, my tongue shall nought else do.

Buddha's renunciation had penetrated deep into the consciousness of the Tamil Buddhists and hence the epic is actually titled 'Manimekalai's Renunciation' (*Manimekalaiyin Turavu*) by its author Sittalai Sathanar. The epic makes it obvious that devotional acts were very important for the early Buddhists and they enjoyed singing about the selfless services of the Buddha for establishing dharma on earth. The heroine herself is a symbol of renunciation and selfless service who has inspired Tamil life and literature down the centuries.

Was there a real Manimekalai? We have no clue to any existing legend that resembles the story of Manimekalai. None of the ladies in the Buddhist *Therigathas*, 'Songs of the Buddhist Nuns', resembles her. As there is a reference in the epic to her taking several births before becoming the prime disciple of Buddha, Dr Vaiyapuri Pillai feels that a close study of the past lives of Ananda or Sariputta recorded in Buddhist works might yield a clue. For

the present, she stands unique, as if suddenly risen from the ocean of Buddhist ethos.

The story of Manimekalai as told in the epic appears cobbled together. There are several branch stories which are in tune with the theme, but Manimekalai is the heroine. Her mother, the courtesan Madhavi, has renounced worldly life and spends her time worshipping Buddha. Her influence upon Manimekalai is deep. When Manimekalai goes to gather flowers in a garden, she overhears Prince Udayakumara—who had avowed his love for her—referring to her as a common woman. What price her love for him? Overwhelmed by anguish, she tells herself that if this be the nature of love, let the feeling die! She would rather live the life of a renunciant. The goddess Manimekala, after whom the heroine has been named, takes the drowsy girl to the island of Manipallavam.

When she wakes up, Manimekalai finds herself alone. She sees the impression of Buddha's feet set up on a lotus-like seat and offers worship. Immediately she is able to recollect her past lives. The goddess teaches her three incantations which would help her take whatever form she wants, remain without hunger, and fly in the air. With the help of Dipatilakai, the guardian of the Manipallavam Island, Manimekalai retrieves the magic vessel

Amuda Surabhi from the Lake Gomukhi. Flying back to Pumpuhar, she takes the blessings of her religious teacher Aravana Adikal and begins her ministry of feeding the hungry and the poor. For the vessel is able to produce food for any number of people in need. She even gets commendation from the Chola king, and with his permission transforms the state prison into a 'hall of charity'.

The Chola prince Udayakumaran wants to possess her and so she puts on the form of the gandharva lady Kayachan-

The story of Manimekalai



dikai and escapes his attention. Kayachandikai's husband, however, mistakes the situation and kills Udayakumaran. The Chola queen imprisons Manimekalai and tries to torture her, but the young girl remains unaffected. Released by the queen, Manimekalai sojourns to various places carrying the vessel and assuaging the hunger of millions. There is an arresting picture of Manimekalai bringing succour to the suffering in Kanchipuram:

Herself worthy of being saluted,
The maid bowed and prayed to the goddesses,
She placed on the Lotus Seat the nectar pot
That was medicine to hunger-sickness
And pronounced: 'Welcome, all living beings!'
Hearing the words of the lovely girl
Folk speaking eighteen tongues came there,
Among them the blind, the deaf, and the lame;
The guardian-less, the dumb, the sick;
Ascetics and people ill with hunger;
And they who had grown poor through idleness.

Even as the vessel brings forth food continuously, Manimekalai goes to these suffering people, bows at their feet, assures them that henceforth it would be good times for them, washes their feet, gives them seats, feeds them with sumptuous and nutritious food, and finally offers them betel leaves and camphor as well.

Even as she engages herself in charitable work, Manimekalai's mind is bent upon renunciation. She makes an attempt to understand the basics of various religions—both Vedic and non-Vedic—but is dissatisfied with them. She then goes to Aravana Adikal for initiation, takes the vows of a nun and enters a Buddhist convent to engage herself in *tapasya*.

The figure of Manimekalai as *aruyir maruttuvi*, 'the physician of life', and *pasippini tirtha pavai*, 'the maid who assuaged the sickness of hunger', has inspired *anna dana*, 'the gift of food', through many centuries in Tamil Nadu. For instance, in the nineteenth century, Ramalinga Swamikal was so taken with this idea that he made the tale come true in his life. A poet and scholar, he had been rendered unhappy by the widespread prevalence of hunger

in his times. His gentle soul grieved at all the sorrows of the world:

Every time I saw crops withering,
I withered too; as often
As I saw hungry destitute beggars,
I too fainted with hunger.
The sight of chronic victims of disease
Made me tremble like a leaf,
And the defeat of the meritorious
Has made me wilt in pain ...
Compassion has overwhelmed me as oft
As I've mixed with living beings.
In distress I've petitioned You for help,
As I do again this day.
My life's run and soul of compassion are one,
Not things wholly different.
My life must cease when my compassion dies—
I swear this at Your feet.³

Saint Ramalinga established the Sattiya Dharma Salai at Mettukuppam and the fires in its kitchen continue to cook food for the hungry that come there.

While the figure of Manimekalai—exquisitely beautiful, clad in the robes of a nun and with her hair shorn—continues to be a moving icon, we

ABANINDRA NATH TAGORE



*Buddha
with his bowl*

have also to take into account the magic vessel and its significance for making the icon of the nun a plausible one. Professor S N Kandaswamy relates Buddha's begging bowl with Manimekalai's Amuda Surabhi, though early Buddhism does not speak of *anna dana* in any special terms. However, ancient Sangam poetry has references to *pasippini marut-tuvan*, the 'physician for the disease of hunger', the chief Pannan:

Tired and hungry by walking long distances
The singers ask: whither is the physician
Who gives medicine for hunger?⁴

Tiruvalluvar, who came a little later, wrote in his *Tirukkural*:

Generosity seeks no recompense:
What do we pay to the clouds?
Wherefore the accumulation of wealth,
Unless it leads to sharing?⁵

Seen from this angle, Manimekalai seems to be an icon exclusively sculpted by Tamil ethos. But the ancient Tamils did not believe in miracle mongering. Sathanar has adroitly made use of the bowl symbolism of Buddhist legend to focus upon an essential component of Tamil culture—feeding the hungry—to help the spread of religion in the southern parts of the land.

More recently, Manimekalai's bowl has been subjected to reinterpretation, shearing it totally of the miraculous but retaining the image of the compassionate nun. K T K Thangamani, for instance, takes a Marxist approach, going back to the Tamil dictum: 'If you give generously, the gift will spring forth in a flood.' A Palani suggests the trusteeship view in his brilliantly conceived poem *Sali Maintan*⁶ and says: 'There is enough in Sathanar's narrative to prove that it (the Amuda Surabhi) was used for begging so that the food thus procured could be distributed to the needy. Paranormal scenes may help the sprightliness of the tale. But such an approach would lessen the humanism in man and bring down the superiority of labour.'

K R Srinivasa Iyengar's epic narrative, *Sati Saptakam* retells the story of several heroines from Sanskrit classics like Damayanti, Sukanya, and Devahuti. The two Tamil heroines found here are Kannaki and Manimekalai. Iyengar also avoids the part played by miracles in Sathanar's epic. Works of compassion have a way of renewing themselves. Aravana Adikal blesses Manimekalai to go to the poor and engage herself in charitable works:

This cup you've received, Manimekalai,
Crowns you, the hallowed Virgin
Who has learnt the unfailing remedy
For the disease of hunger.

Go forth into this world of waste and want
With Amuda Surabhi
In hand, and you'll both replenish the cup
And give food to the needy.

This cup perennial is the image
Of our fertile homestead Earth,
Dear bounteous Devi Shakhambhari,
Mother of her children all.

We then take leave of this glorious maiden in the garments of a renunciant, as she receives charity from the rich, dispenses it to the poor, and feels fulfilled:

And she wondered: wasn't her cup, the Chalice
Of Grace, acting through the heart,
Even like a mother's breast when it yields
To her babe ambrosial milk?

Still young in years, Manimekalai felt
Ageless, and looking on all
As but children worthy of love. She saw
Herself as Mother of All.

PB

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Frames and Their Fills

Swami Samarpanananda

A JOURNEY down our memory lane reveals some very interesting characteristics of our brain. For instance, we tend to remember only the broad outlines, the general aspects of things, individuals, incidents, whereas the details associated with them are not easily recalled. At the same time, the brain has the capacity to provide by itself—that is, without the intervention of the conscious will—details that help to construct an integral whole of something when there is need for it. Thus, when we hum a song in front of someone who knows it and stop midway, the listener automatically provides the next words.



Figure A



Figure B

To make it more graphical we can take a simple example from the Gestalt school of psychology. In figure A we have a chain of dots grouped in a circular way, though one missing dot prevents the formation of a full circle. In figure B we have an incomplete black disk. In both the cases the mind tends to complete the missing portion to form a full circle and a complete disk. In this example ‘roundness’ or ‘circle-ness’ is the superstructure, while each particular dot or the black colour that makes the disk is the detail. In this article we shall term all superstructures as ‘frames’, and the process of completing them with the necessary details to make an integral whole the ‘filling up’ of a given frame.

The brain cannot handle incomplete frames very well. It demands a harmonious, logical whole, with-

out which it feels uneasy. In his famous book *Phantoms in the Brain*, V S Ramachandran has discussed these issues. What was a mere suspicion concerning the fallibility of observation, through all the senses, has been clinically found to be correct: the brain supplies data of its own whenever there is need.

The brain is not only good at supplying the missing details of a given frame, it also works the other way round: it constructs frames for the details that do not fit in the existing or known frames. Philosophical speculations, developments in mathematics and theoretical physics, struggle to formulate patterns and laws in every field of knowledge are some examples of advanced brains consciously creating frames that take care of ill-fitting data. For example, a Newton’s brain, trained or accustomed to work with theoretical frames in the field of physics, feels uneasy if there is not a theory or a mathematical equation that accounts for the fall of an apple from a tree. That uneasiness drives this person to work hard till it gets a proper frame for the given detail of something falling to the ground.

In the field of psychology we find that a stump of wood in the darkness of night is perceived variously as a ghost, a thief, a friend, a valuable object, or something else by different observers depending on the tendency of their brains to create particular types of frames—a fearful person will tend to perceive a ghost, a policeman a thief, a lonely person a friend, and a businessman an object of trade. This tendency of the brain to construct specific frames is conditioned by our surroundings, education, samskaras, and of course by our will, though the will may not be active at the time a frame is being created or is being filled up.

A balanced life needs both right frames and correct fillings. If either of these becomes too weak,

one lands in the mire of wild speculation and futile imagination, and consequent ineffective or wrong action. Schizophrenic thinking, obsessions, and logical inconsistencies are all examples of unsound frames or incomplete fillings.

Frames above Fillings

Though frames and fillings are equally important for a harmonious structure, frames come before fillings in the sense that frames belong to the fundamentals of something in which details are made to fit. What happens with structures that get their wholeness only after 'all' their parts are properly fitted? Are not the parts as fundamental as the whole? After all, a car cannot run if any of its vital parts are missing. A little thought will show us that this is not so. For instance, Acharya Shankara in his commentary on the *Mandukya Upanishad* uses the simile of a coin comprising four quarters to explain the three states of consciousness and the transcendental fourth state of consciousness, Turiya. Three quarters of the coin are the three states of consciousness, while there is a fourth quarter that, when it comes into the picture, not only 'completes' but also 'is' the whole integral unit. Of course, we need to remember that this is just a simile to explain a state that cannot be reached through reasoning or words. But even following this abstract metaphor of the coin we find that unless the whole is framed, the details are valueless. The parts of a car can be combined only after one has conceived of the car as a whole. In the extreme case of Advaita Vedanta, without the framework of Brahman, the details of the objective world are absolutely non-existent.

If we come to the practical field of education, the importance of frames over fillings is indisputable. The success of any communication or description on the part of the teacher depends on the accuracy of a given frame and the power to fill it up properly. But only the one who knows well the frames is able to create the necessary fillings. Children who have grasped the principles behind fundamental mathematical operations will be able

to use them successfully, however large be the numbers they are asked to work with. On the contrary, those who pay more attention to the fillings, fail while confronting complicated problems. Focusing on the details without trying to impress upon young minds the frames of any subject only results in a chaotic accumulation of information. Many great scientists, including Einstein and Ramanujan, were failures at school because their teachers failed to apprehend the frames that they chose to work with. The goal of all education should be to make students conversant with the frames of a subject.

Indian thinkers of the past were well aware of this fact. That is why they developed the philosophical and religious literature in the form of sutras, in which all the essentials of a subject are expressed or written down aphoristically. Any student desirous of learning a text would simply learn all the aphorisms. The commentaries on the sutras, which are like fillings, came later. That is how we have so many different commentaries on every sutra-treatise.

The same applies to the field of religion. One needs to know the frames thoroughly; the details get automatically filled up, or are ignored even. A devotee of Christ knows his exalted character, sacrifice, and love; these are part of the essentials. Details like the date of his birth, the name of his parents, and the like are non-essentials. These details may be important in historical studies, but from the spiritual standpoint they are not of much importance.

Resistance to Change of Frames

With age, the brain becomes less flexible. It is then difficult for it to modify a pattern or frame even if it is wrongly created or is out of use at the present time. There is a tendency in the brain to react negatively whenever it has to confront an input that is a mismatch for its related frames. For instance, a person who is accustomed to seeing the young behave obediently towards seniors gets scandalized when such behaviour is not forthcoming.

This tendency of the brain explains why we react strongly when we come across people who fail to

live up to our 'framed' expectations. Most of us value honesty and try to be honest in our dealings. So, when we find our pockets picked in a crowded place, or shoes lifted from a temple premises, we feel very sad. This sadness is not so much for the loss, but for the ill-fitting detail of cheating in the existing frame of expectations in our brain. In the same way, people expect their children to be truthful, honest, and well-behaved. But when children fail to live up to these expectations, parents tend to react violently, particularly when they are faced with such situations for the first time.

The problem does not lie with the incidents of life, but with our own frames of expectation from the world. Every time we are assailed with negative emotions like sadness, anger, depression, or spite, we can analyse the situation and see how the inputs from the world failed to fit in the frames of our brain. We might be surprised to learn that the external world is not responsible for our pain, but it is our own frames that are responsible. Finding a defective frame and trying to change it generally demands tremendous effort and may initially create a kind of aversion, especially if the defective frame is well established in our brain. But in the long run this change helps us to adjust better to different circumstances, which results in a more balanced life and less painful reactions.

For example, if we tell a lie, assuming that we are normally truthful persons, our conscience pricks. Depending on the nature of the lie, we may feel bad and become mentally restless. If we have a strong commitment to the frame of truthfulness, we may even lose sleep or attempt extreme actions of self-punishment. The best antidote for such a situation is not to change the frame of truthfulness, but to modify the frame of false pride in a way that allows us to confess the guilt to the right person, or if this is not possible, to perform some kind of non-violent expiation. Therefore, first we are to identify the wrongly built frames, or their incorrect fillings, without altering the correct ones. Then comes the process of modification or total replacement, which needs energy and time.

The Dilemma of the Frame • The scientific enterprise, like others, becomes edged with a tragic sense when scientists suspect that they have wasted their lives. In confining work to the requirements of a demanding and unfulfillable paradigm, scientists are not using themselves up in their work and are, indeed, sacrificing, leaving unexpressed, certain parts of themselves—their playful impulses, their unverified hunches, their speculative imagination. When scientists commit themselves compulsively to a life-wasting high science model, they are making a metaphysical wager. They are wagering that the sacrifice is 'best for science'. Whether this is really so, they cannot confirm; but they often need no further confirmation than the pain this self-confinement inflicts upon them.

—Adapted from *Alvin Gouldner*

Patterns of Morality

Each person or society forms its own principles of morality in accordance with its culture, religion, environment, and such other factors. What passes off as morality is only the mental frame of beliefs and convictions of an individual or a group of individuals against which all actions, external and internal, are matched. If some actions fit the relevant frames well, one feels good; if not, one is disturbed.

At the same time, there are thousands of values in any society, and not every value is picked up by every person. The set of values practised by an individual is his or her personalized value system, which becomes the real framework of his or her life. All inputs from the external world, and also the individual's actions, are made to conform to this framework.

Unfortunately, many values are not chosen but imposed on the individual. These imposed frames become mere fillings for that person, matters of secondary importance. This is at the root of all personality disintegration, since one has to act not in conformity with what one believes to be right, the real frames of one's mind, but to a set of imposed fillings. In most cases, even the concerned person does not realize this incongruity.

However, it is easy to recognize if a particular frame is a person's own or is imposed from outside. If someone commits an act contrary to expectations but does not repeat the action, then it is a sign that this person is either modifying a wrongly established frame or discarding an imposed one. If the action is repeated, then it is likely to be a part of that person's personality trait.

When one attempts to modify or replace a frame, there may appear inner and outer resistance. People may criticize, blame, or laugh. But if the frames are the correct ones, one's consciousness remains free from tension and guilt feelings.

The frames themselves are not as rigid as we might suppose them to be. A regular exposure to an act may change a frame and it becomes accepted as the new standard. We often tend to change frames by indulging in actions we once considered taboo. The vestiges of old frames may however continue to exert their influence, though to a lesser degree. For example, a person who is educated to be honest but later becomes corrupt and accepts corruption as a way of life, may try to encourage his or her children not to take to this slippery path.

We tend to brand persons as immoral or insensitive when their acts fail to fit in our own frames. An interesting case is provided by those who, though themselves indulging in certain acts, condemn the same in others. We may try to pass them off as hypocrites, but actually they may not be so. The explanation may lie in the frame structure. When people condemn others, although themselves guilty of the same faults, it often means that they feel bad about their own wrong actions. If this feeling is not present, then they may be fairly judged as having double standards.

The growth or contraction of character often depends on the way one interacts with society, but what one assimilates from these exchanges is dependent on one's personal frames. One may read, hear, or see many things, but ultimately one retains only that which fits one's established frames. The rest simply flows over. This makes the understanding of higher spiritual, religious, or even moral

teachings difficult for those who carry rigidly formulated opposing frames. To prevent oneself from falling into this trap of fanaticism, one may do well to remember that real growth is a stepwise process, because that is how frames are generally constructed—by steps and over time.

In the history of humankind, the real successful people have been those who defined their frames on universal principles of truth, goodness, love—over, and in spite of, the local and temporal frames imposed by society. Every great thinker rebelled against many of the existing ideas and beliefs of contemporary society. Nachiketa went against his father, Buddha condemned Vedic sacrifices, Jesus opposed the way of worship in synagogues, Ramakrishna rebelled against the worldly trend of society, Gandhi was ostracized by the people of his own caste, and Vivekananda fought against the insensitivity towards the oppressed masses. Wherever we may care to observe, we find that every successful person has been a rebel against the crystallized frames of the social mind.

The only way to lead a sane and a meaningful life is to focus on frames structured on universal and lofty principles for oneself and for everybody. These frames have to be freely selected and filled up by each individual, and must not be copied blindly from others. Gandhi chose certain frames for himself and made every action of his life fill those frames accordingly. For him, nothing existed outside those frames. The same was the case with Ramakrishna. His frames were built up exclusively on spiritual principles and he filled them up with the existing data of the religious world. He pointed out the data that were not properly fitting those frames, and even provided new insights hitherto unknown and unrecognized by the religious world.

Therefore, our goal must be to fix workable frames, and then allow only those details that fit into these frames well. Every individual ought to be free to choose his or her frames of reference. When that is not possible it is wise to follow the frames provided by persons of insight who have successfully walked through life. For, as the Mahabharata says, 'That which the wise have trodden, is the path.' ❧

Light on Patanjali – III

Swami Sarvagatananda

No Negative Thoughts

THE mind must be absolutely pure, only then illumination takes place. That is why Patanjali says that the final samadhi ‘is attained by the constant practice of cessation of all mental activity.’ You must be at it constantly. If you stop, the thoughts again accumulate; give a little pause and they come up again. That is why there must be a period of intense spiritual struggle, when you don’t care for anything else and you put the whole mind, soul, and body into this intense spiritual struggle. Until you attain the cessation of all mental activities, this requires a constant struggle.

You must be very careful. First attack the negative. Ask yourself if you have any negative thoughts, negative impressions. First clean these out, it does not matter if they are based on factual evidence or not; if they are in your mind, forget about the spiritual life. One negative thought can throw you off. That is why Swami Vivekananda tells: ‘From me no danger be to aught that lives.’

Hate not and hurt not. If there is one negative thought there is no spiritual life. That is why so much effort is required on our part to keep off all negative thoughts. Negative thoughts really colour the mind dark; they don’t allow you to see things clearly.

Looking through a negative thought you see the whole world in a biased way, in a negative way. If there is one disturbing thought, one negative thought, through that distorted prism, that dis-

torted glass, that distorted lens, you see the world. What do you see? You see everything disturbed. Put off all negative thoughts if you want to have clear perception, true understanding—and then gradually put off the positive also. Positive thoughts are also dirt to the mind, because they are foreign to the mind. What is dirt? Anything out of place is dirt, trash. Sugar in the sugar bowl is all right; throw the sugar on the carpet, it becomes dirt. It may be good in the sugar bowl but it is not good on the carpet.

Likewise with good thoughts, if they collect in the mind you are coloured by them. They also must go out. All thoughts, good and bad, must get out, ‘by the constant practice of cessation of all mental activity, in which the *chitta* retains only the unmanifested impressions.’ They are all there but they are unmanifested.

Harinath, later Swami Turiyananda, asked Sri Ramakrishna how to destroy all the passions—hate, greed, love, lust, anger. He was told that one cannot destroy them. Then what is to be done? Turn the course of the mind. What happens then? The thoughts become ineffective.

Thoughts become powerful because of two factors—you are interested in them, you pay attention to them. If you go on pondering over them, entertaining them, they become very powerful. If you are not interested, if you don’t pay attention, gradually they lie down. They then become unmanifested impressions; they are all submerged, they do not manifest; they are still there, you cannot destroy them.

You can neither destroy nor forget any thought. The more you try to forget a thought, the more you remember it. Never try to forget a thought, instead be detached. After appraisal say: ‘It is not to

The text is a compilation of minimally edited extracts from the author’s book *Meditation as Spiritual Culmination: Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (Boston: Vedanta Society of Massachusetts, 2005). The book is a transcript of the author’s lectures on raja yoga, delivered between September 1977 and June 1981, at Boston.

Friendliness, compassion, and goodwill are the three kinds of sentiments that are recommended. Strength of friendliness is acquired by entertaining friendliness towards the happy. By cultivating compassion towards the unhappy, strength of compassion is developed. And by being pleased with the virtuous, strength of goodwill is developed.

—Vyasa on *Yoga Sutra*, 3.23

be entertained.’ Look at it clearly and know that it is not to be harboured, not to be entertained, not to be identified with, not to be attached to, that is all. Don’t try to forget; the more you try to forget, the more they come up. That is why suppression or repression doesn’t help, you have to resolve them: silence them by becoming aware, by knowing the tendencies; then the mind-stuff retains the impressions only in the unmanifested form. Due to the constant practice of cessation of mental activity, in the final stage, all the impressions remain down [buried in the *chitta*] and you see nothing there.

It is just as if all the creatures in the water are down below, you see nothing moving on or in the water; the ocean is calm and quiet, they are all deep down, they create no waves, the water is clear, clean, and calm—but throw in a bait and again the creatures come up and disturb the waters. Likewise the thoughts are all down in the mind-stuff, inactive. That is why it is said that one must be very careful until the end—never take it for granted: ‘Oh, I am quite alright.’ Some people think: ‘Oh, I have attained this, I am safe now.’ Until you are absolutely merged in the last stage you are never safe. Until you reach that stage you can be disturbed at any time, the thoughts are ready.

Forgiveness

You never forget your thoughts, impressions, tendencies. If you feel that you were wronged, you always keep the grudge. So long as you keep the grudge in your mind, you are a slave; you have to pay a high price for it. You cannot forget it; you have to

forgive. Unless you have learnt to forgive, you have not entered one bit into the spiritual life. That is why Jesus put it into the Lord’s Prayer: ‘O God, forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us.’

If you do not forgive, you are gone. Don’t think of spiritual life, not even of moral life—the first principle of moral life is to forgive. Why? If you remember the negative thought, if you do not know how to forgive, that will bother you. It may have happened twenty years ago, somebody did something wrong to you, you practically don’t remember it now. Suddenly that man walks in front of you. Just observe your mind: ‘What this fellow has done to me!’ And you jump, you are agitated, you lose your temper, are almost ready to do something.

Just watch your mind. The same thing happens whenever you remember negative things that are done to you by others—you are miserable. Somebody said: ‘What is happiness? Good health and bad memory.’ Thank God, if you forget. But what is our condition? Bad health and good memory. The more sickly we are the more we remember the injuries that have been done to us by others: ‘Oh, so and so did this to me!’ We never forget.

If you want to be peaceful in this world, do one thing: forgive everyone who has done some wrong to you. Say from inside: ‘O God, forgive them. I will forgive them.’ If you don’t do that, then enjoy the misery.

Raja yoga is not just to take you to heaven, to make some miracle happen. No! Raja yoga helps you to realize your own true state. There is no miracle here; you need not go anywhere; wherever you are, you begin to feel your true state. That means you have to remove from your mind all those attachments, all those feelings, both negative and positive. The negative feelings are more disturbing than the positive. That is why you have to forgive—you can’t forget them. Many times people say: ‘Oh, forget it.’ You can’t forget it, it will be there.

If you forgive, even though you remember, they don’t disturb you. If you want to have full freedom and peace of mind, the only way is to forgive, not to react to negative things.



Vithoba of Pandharpur

Dr Suruchi Pande

(Continued from the previous issue)



The Pundalika temple,
flooded by the Chandrabhaga

FROM Jnaneshwar (1275–1296) to Namdev (1270?–1350?) • Though the Varkari tradition had originated before their time, Jnaneshwar and Namdev provided it with a firm foundation and a unique philosophy. Jnaneshwar was the major source of inspiration. The Natha tradition, into which Jnaneshwar was initiated by his brother Nivrattinatha, is primarily concerned with yoga. But we notice the intimacy of devotion in the writings of both the brothers. Even their father's name, Vitthalapant, suggests that there was a tradition of Vitthala-bhakti in the family.

Vitthalapant had taken sannyasa some time after his marriage to Rakhumai. When his teacher Ramananda came to know that he had done so without the consent of his wife, he ordered Vitthalapant to go back and reassume the householder's life. Vitthalapant complied with his teacher's command and had four children: Nivratti, Jnanadeva, Sopana, and the daughter Muktabai. To the local brahmana community and the scholars, Vitthalapant's abdication of sannyasa was sacrilegious. The whole family was excommunicated from society. The couple decided to end their lives by way of expiation so that their children would not have to face injustice and torture.

Jnanadeva had to go to Paithan to get a *shuddhipatra* (certificate of purification through expiation, *prayashchitta*) from the learned brahmanas of that town. This was in 1290. While returning from Paithan, Jnanadeva halted at the village Nevase. Sitting besides a pillar in the local Shiva temple he composed his exquisite commentary on the Bhagavadgita called *Bhavartha-dipika* or *Jnaneshwari*. It has no equal in Marathi literature. The text provides the Varkari order its tranquil philosophy. Having experienced grave social injustice, Jnaneshwar was quick to apprehend that none in society was keen on understanding the real essence of religion; external bustle and ostentatious display seemed more important. So he was eager to convey the proper meaning of religious philosophy and show its application to everyday life.

Jnaneshwar propounds the theory of *chidvilasa-vada*. If we presume *chaitanya*, universal consciousness, to be the only truth, then whatever is seen or experienced becomes false, *mithya*, in the ultimate analysis. This view, stretched to the extreme, can lead to complete nihilism. The theory of *chidvilasa-vada* avoids such extremes.

According to *chid-vilasa-vada*, *chaitanya* is inseparable from energy, and the universe, *vishwa*, is its manifestation or play, *vilasa*. The term 'maya' also suggests a sort of play, but this play is for God or Ishwara to enjoy. Jnaneshwar believes '*brahma satya*; Brahman is Truth' and '*jivo brahmaiva naparah*; the individual soul is none other than Brahman'. But he lays greater emphasis on '*sarvam khalvidam brahma*'; all this is indeed Brahman' than on the intricacies of the doctrine of maya. He does not call this world *abhasa* or appearance. He prefers such examples as gold and golden ornaments, water and its waves, fabric and its fibres to explain the unity underlying diversity. He does not cite the examples of the 'rope and the snake', *rajju-sarpa*, where the snake is illusory. Jnaneshwar knew that the paths of yoga and jnana were difficult for ordinary people. So he introduced the comparatively easier path of knowledge combined with devotion. According to R K Bhagwat: 'Although Jnāndev was mainly a follower of the Path of Yoga, he was also a follower of the Path of Devotion and also a "Vaishṇava", a follower of the four-fold caste system. With all this, it seems strange that absolutely no reference was made to God Vithobā of Pandharpur in the whole of Bhāvārthadīpikā, although there is an indirect reference to that God in that, Lord Krishna says that he holds on his head God Shankar, his great devotee.'¹⁷

Sri Bhagwat adds another hint: 'It seems that through his association with Nāmdev, Jnāndev got admitted into the Vārkarī sect of devotees, the leadership of which also soon devolved on him' (ibid.). Thus the later compositions of Jnaneshwar also proved useful in the development of the philosophy of the Varkari sect.

Jnaneshwar's was the period of the Yadava dynasty. The *Jnaneshwari* records:

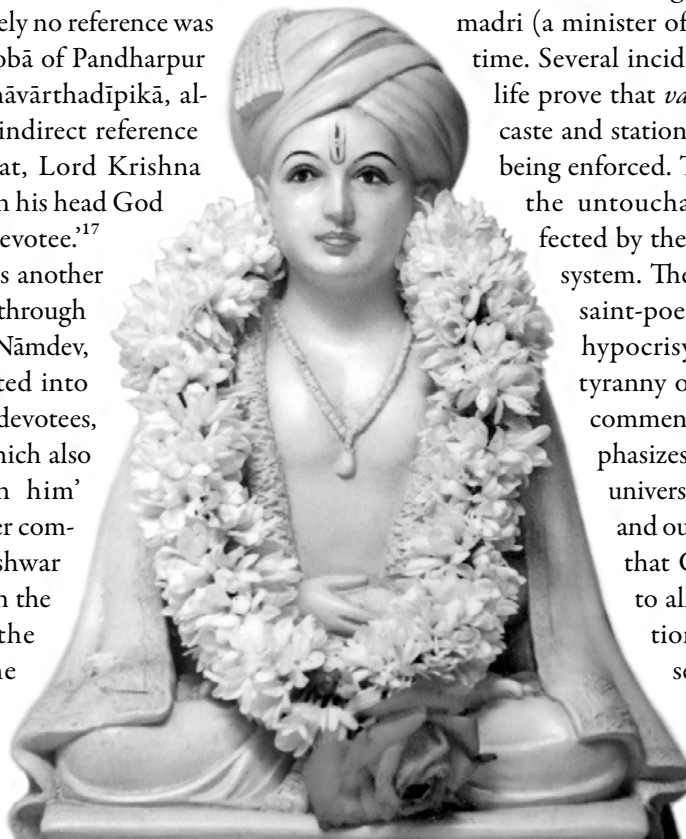
*Tetha yaduvamshavilasu je sakalakala nivasu;
Nyayati poshi kshitishu shriramachandra.*

There (reigns) the just protector of the earth—Sri Ramachandra of the Yadava dynasty, the very abode of all arts.¹⁸

According to Professor Vafgaonkar, '*Jnaneshwari* was written in 1290 AD. Ramdeva had freed Kashi from the clutches of Yavanas three or four years before this and had built the temple of Sharngadhara. And when *Jnaneshwari* was being written, Ramdeva ruled Kashi. Perhaps because of the victory of Ramdeva and freeing of *mlecchakranta Kashi*, *Jnaneshwari* honoured him in the *Jnaneshwari*. ... Even in the temple of *Panduranga* the inscription of Chauryanshicha Shilalekha, the king Ramdevaraya was called as the *Pandhari-phada-mukhya*.'¹⁹ It should be noted that this was the period when society was governed by *karma-kanda* or rituals prescribed in the Smritis, as is evidenced by the composition of *Chaturvarga-chintamani* by Hemadri (a minister of Ramadeva's) at this time. Several incidents in Jnaneshwar's life prove that *varnashrama* rules (of caste and station in life) were strictly being enforced. The upper castes and the untouchables were both affected by the rigidity of the caste system.

The tender heart of the saint-poet was pained by the hypocrisy, sectarianism, and tyranny of the orthodox. His commentary on the Gita emphasizes the development of universality of consciousness and outlook by announcing that God's gates are open to all without any distinction of caste, creed, or sex. He preached the Bhagavata Dharma

Sant Jnaneshwar



of devotion to the Divine that underlies universal religion.

Jnaneshwar went on long pilgrimages to far off places in northern India in the company of Namdev. Both of them spread far and wide the tenets of true religion coloured with devotion and compassion. Jnaneshwar ended his sojourn on earth by voluntarily choosing to be buried alive while in samadhi—*jivanta samadhi*—in the presence of his brothers, sister, and other saints. He was only twenty-one then.

Namdev has his own singular contributions to the developments of the Varkari *sampradaya*. He went to stay at Ghuman near Amritsar, established a tradition of Vitthala-bhakti, and popularized the teachings of the Bhagavata Dharma through his forceful kirtans composed in the emerging Hindi. Ghuman is known as *namdevki ghomani*, Namdev's Ghuman. The saffron flag flying in front of the memorial temple at Namdev's math is called Jhandasahib Sri Namdevji. Among Namdev's disciples were Vishnuswami, Bohardas, Jallo Sutar, Laddha Khatri, and Keso Kalasdhari.²⁰ The Delhi sultans ruled over North India at this time. It was in times of much political turmoil that Namdev accomplished his work. While compiling the *Adi Granth*, Guru Arjun included sixty-one of Namdev's hymns. In one of these, Namdev says: '*Ibhai bithalu, ubhai bithalu, bithala binu samsar nahi*; Vitthala is here, Vitthala is there, without Vitthala the world is not.'

Namdev wished that his body be kept near the Panduranga temple steps so that devotees would touch him with their holy feet while entering the temple. The Namdevchi Payari fulfils this wish symbolically. When the *dindis* (group of Varkaris) come near this step, they sing one of his *abhangas*:

*Sadhusanta sharan jau jivebhaye
Prasada svabhaye deti gheti;
Nama mhane amhi payariche chire
Santa paya hire var deti*

We take complete refuge in saints. They will shower

grace according to their very (compassionate) nature. Namdev says that we are hewn and shaped stones which holy saints step on.

The efforts of Jnaneshwar and Namdev were particularly momentous because they emphatically enunciated that the doors of the Bhagavata religion were open to all. This period is significant in view of the works of a galaxy of saints from all sections of society. These included brahmanas like Nivrittinatha, Sopanadeva, Muktabai, Visoba Khechara, and Parisa Bhagavata, the potter Goroba, the gardener Savatoba, Kanhopatra—the daughter of a prostitute—the maid servant Janabai, the cobbler Rohidas, the goldsmith Narahari, the barber Sena, and other saints from the lower classes like Chokhoba, Raka, and Banka. All of them were dazzling jewels in the social movement of the Varkari *sampradaya*. All of them practised religion in their own lives and tried to discover the expression and manifestation of their deity in their own work or profession. They avoided scholastic discussions about Brahman but boldly addressed vexed social issues. Chokhoba announced: '*Harinama garjata bhaya nahi chitta*; repeating the name of Hari, the mind knows no fear.'

The Period of Bhanudas (1448–1513) and Eknath (1533–99) • It is traditionally believed that King Krishnadeva Raya of Vijayanagar had the image of Panduranga taken to Hampi, possibly to prevent desecration by Muslim invaders. The absence of the deity sent the whole of Pandharpur into a pall of gloom. It was Paithankar Bhanudas Maharaj who brought back the deity to Pandharpur. Bhanudas's family was traditionally devoted to Vitthala. He says:

*Amuchiye kuli pandhari nema
Mukhi sada nama vithobache.*

In our family there is a tradition of *vari* to Pandharpur and (we) always repeat the name of Vithoba.

Eknath was the great-grandson of Bhanudas. He performed rigorous sadhana for twelve years

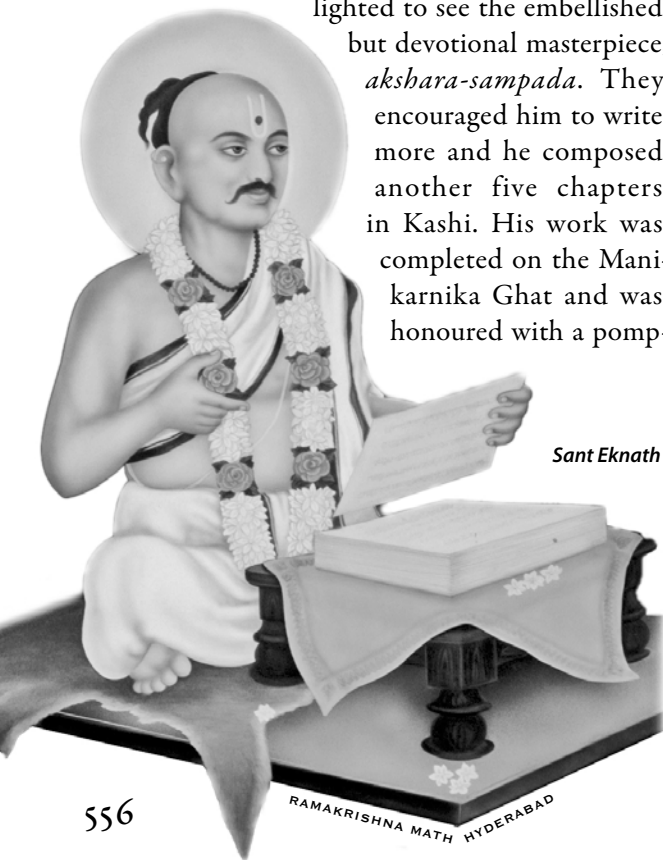
under the watchful eyes of his guru Janardana Swami. His life was the perfect synthesis of *prapancha* (dutiful householder life) and *paramartha* (spirituality). He supported the Varkari *sampradaya* through his witty kirtans, bhajans, *vari*, and religious celebrations and literature. He performed Hari-kirtan everyday in the Vitthala temple at Paithan. He was a scholar of the Sanskrit language and philosophy. His erudition and mastery of Sanskrit and Indian philosophical traditions is reflected throughout his literary compositions. Though highly influenced by the Advaita philosophy, he loved the sweetness of bhakti and the recitation of God's name. Though a grihastha, he was the very incarnation of *shanta-brahma* (the calm of Brahman)! That is why his words reach the hearts of its readers instantaneously. Eknath wrote a commentary in *ovi* verse on the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavata. The orthodox brahmanas of Paithan were displeased with him because the commentary was in Prakrit. So Eknath took his writing to Kashi. The pandits of Kashi were delighted to see the embellished

but devotional masterpiece, *akshara-sampada*. They encouraged him to write more and he composed another five chapters in Kashi. His work was completed on the Manikarnika Ghat and was honoured with a pomp-

ous procession. In a way, this was a great laudation for the entire Varkari *sampradaya*.

Other works of Eknath include the *Bhavartha Ramayana*, *Rukmini-swayamvara*, commentary on the *Chatuhshloki Bhagavata*, *Swatmasukha*, *Anandalahari*, *Hastamalaka*, and *Shukashtaka*. Today we can read the *Jnaneshwari* in its pure form only because of the laborious efforts that Eknath put in to bring out a standard edition, rid of the corruptions that had crept in through oral traditions. The *bharudas* of Eknath have special place in Marathi literature. These are metaphorical verses which expound morality and religion through commonplace themes. Deities like Khandoba, Jokhai, and Yallamma; birds and animals—lapwing, ox, dog, and ram; children's games—*tipri* (played with pieces of sticks) and *eki-beki* (a number game); household chores—grinding and pounding; and family relations: all figure in these *bharudas*. Eknath was perfectly sensitive to the social system and honestly tried to correct misinterpretation of religious tenets. He criticized the violence done in the name of religious sacrifices, *bali*. Spirituality was actively expressed in his life. His emptying his *kawad* (water jars) full of the holy Godavari waters into the mouth of an ass dying of thirst; his feeding of untouchables on the occasion of the *shraddha* ceremony; his calm when spat upon repeatedly by a vindictive Muslim as he was returning from his bath; his bringing up of an untouchable boy; his spiritual ministrations to a concubine, to a prostitute, and to a criminal who had fled from jail; his patience with his arrogant son—all illustrate his social awareness and courage to act out his convictions. He also had a firm belief in the Advaita philosophy. His life is an excellent illustration of *kriyashila jnana*, knowledge expressed in action.

A story is traditionally narrated about the fond relationship between Eknath and Jnaneshwar. Eknath was suffering from an affliction in his throat when Jnaneshwar appeared to him in a dream and told him that he would be cured if he removed the root of the Ajana tree that was encircling his (Jnaneshwar's) neck in his samadhi-pitha at Alandi.



Sant Eknath

Eknath did likewise and was not only cured but was also inspired to bring out a corrected edition of *Jñaneshwari*. Eknath tried to reach out to the simple, illiterate masses with the message of the Varkari *sampradaya*. He says:

*Kara kara lagpatha
Dhara pandharichi vata;
Pundalikachi peth
Sopi ahe sarvansi.*

Be consistent and hold on to the path of Pandhari. The *peth* (abode or way) of Pundalika is simple and easy for all.

The Period of Tukaram (1608–49) • Tukaram was born at Dehu, fifteen miles from Pune. Tukaram's life is a mix of intense joys and sorrows. His family was devoted to Vitthala for eight generations. But they suffered from harsh famine; his wife and son died and he became bankrupt. Tormented by difficulties in household life, death of dear ones, and jealous neighbours, his lot was one of agony and hardships. 'I am always warring,' he says, 'with the world and with the mind. Accidents befall me all of a sudden, and I try to ward them off by the power of Thy name.' Despite his suffering, Tukaram is straightforward, upright, firm, and direct in his thoughts as is seen from his *abhangas*.

The 'dark night' of Tukaram's soul finally ended with the vision of God: 'I see God's face, and the vision gives me infinite bliss. My mind is riveted on it, and my hands cling to His feet.' His deep identification with the Deity gives him a missionary zeal: 'I enjoy this sweet ambrosia and distribute it among men. Do not wander among the woods. Come here and partake of my offer. Your desires shall be fulfilled, if your intellect is fastened to His feet. I come as a messenger from Vitthala.'

Just like Eknath before him, Tukaram chose the medium of kirtan to spread the message of knowledge and devotion. Brahmanas like Rameshwara Bhatta, who opposed him initially, came to love his kirtans. Shivaji was also highly impressed by his kirtans. Tukaram never advised people to run away from their duties. He said that everyone should do



Sant Tukaram

their duties to perfection, but one must always be aware of one's own spiritual essence. He was of the opinion that being spiritual did not mean being impractical. He says:

*Jodoniya dhana uttama vyavahare
Udasa vichare vecab kari.*

Wealth is to be accumulated through immaculate conduct; and spent with the feeling of detachment.

Again, '*Nasave oshal, maga maniti sakala*; do not be burdened by unnecessary obligations, then will all respect you.'

Saint Tukaram spent his whole life spreading the teachings of the Varkari *sampradaya*. He harshly criticized the hypocrisy and malpractices current in society. His disciple Nilobaraya also composed many *abhangas* and was widely-known for his devotional singing.

The Period after Tukaram • An array of saints and holy persons have continued to be associated

with the Varkari tradition, though they are not as well known as those mentioned above. They have continued to sincerely work for the uplift of the masses. A group (*phada*) of Mallappa Vaskar was one of the prominent groups in the post-Tukaram era.

Contributions of the Varkari Sampradaya

All the saints of the Varkari *sampradaya* were against dry, futile *karma-kanda*—ritual and idle talk. They tried to emphasize the true spiritual and humanistic essence of religion. They presented dharma in a simple, straightforward, and practical form. They emphatically propounded the religion of love and fraternity. Though profound scholars themselves, they decried sapless scholarship which failed to sense the nearness of God. They stressed the cultivation of an affectionate and loving heart.


The work of these saints had great social importance, for they were great reformers. They did not have sectarian views or a shallow spirit. They lived the philosophy they taught. They provided the common men and women with the courage to aspire after *brahma-jnana*, the knowledge of Brahman. They said that every being—not the monk alone—is capable of getting moksha. The doors of Ishwara are open to all. They pointed out that ‘celibacy is not just the avoidance of the company of women; *navhe brahmacharya bailichya tyage*’; the feeling of non-attachment should be deep-rooted and natural.

The literature of the Varkari *sampradaya* is a treasure of the Marathi language. Some of the saints speak in tones that are delicate and tender, like the rays of the moon, while others speak with the fierceness of fire. The breadth of their vision is eloquently articulated in Jnaneshwar’s ‘Pasayadana’:

May the Supreme Self be propitiated by this sacrifice in the form of a literary production and grant me in charity only one boon (*pasaya*): that the evil vision of the vile and wicked lose all its crookedness and sting, and that they develop love towards good actions; and further that there be fellow-feeling amongst all beings. May the darkness in the form of sin get destroyed, and may the people of the entire universe conduct themselves

in the light of the rising sun in the form of one’s own (religious) duty; and may each and every being get the fulfilment of each and every wish of his. Let the concourse of saints that shower all that is propitious on the universe, appear and visit perpetually the aggregate of beings on this earth. These saints are, as it were, the blossoms of the moving ‘Kalpataru’ trees, or the lively towns of sentient ‘Chintamani’ gems, or the talking oceans of nectar. May these saints who are uncontaminated moons and heatless suns be the constant kinsmen (*soyare*) of all. In short, let all the three worlds be happy and perfected (with the bliss of monism), and let them render service eternally to the primeval Supreme Being. And especially those in this universe that (literally) live on (the constant study of) this work (the Gita): may they have perfect happiness both temporal as well as spiritual. Hearing this, the Lord of the universe (in the form of the preceptor Nivrittinath) said, ‘This boon has been granted to you’, at which Jnanadev became very happy.²¹

Acknowledgment

I gratefully thank Sri Vitthal-Rukmini Devasthan Samiti, Pandharpur, for granting permission to take photographs in the temple premises, and Sri Radha-Damodar Pratishthan, Pune, for permitting me to use the images of saints from their publication *Tejache Chandane*. 

Notes and References

17. Sri Jnanadeva’s *Bhavartha Dipika*, trans. R K Bhagwat, (Madras: Samata, 1989), xxii. The reference here seems to allude to the *pindi* (linga of Shiva), on the head of Sri Vitthala of Pandharpur, a unique characteristic of this image.
18. *Jnaneshwari*, 18.1804.
19. *Varkari Sampradaya*, 39.
20. Bahirat observes: ‘In the Punjab region, many people from downtrodden communities like Shimpi, Tanka Kshatriya, Shripa, Darjee, Jassal, Tippee, Sappal, Kaitha, Bhatta have reverence for Namdev. They feel that Namdev helped them to achieve a raised or uplifted status for good living’; *Varkari Sampradaya*, 50.
21. Adapted from Sri Jnanadeva’s *Bhavartha Dipika*, 671.

Ramakrishna's Influence on Girish's Plays

Swami Chetanananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

Kalapahar

GIRISH based *Kalapahar* on a historical event and his own knowledge of human love. He also incorporated Ramakrishna's teachings into it. *Kalapahar* was first performed on 26 September 1896 at the Star Theatre in Hatibagan, Calcutta. This five-act play is very long, and it has many characters. It is therefore not possible to describe it act by act, as has been done thus far; instead what follows is a summary of the plot, with emphasis placed on those sections where Girish introduced Ramakrishna's ideas. In *Kalapahar* he portrays Ramakrishna in the character of Chintamani, a holy man, and Latu (Swami Adbhutananda) in the character of Leto, a disciple.

The main characters:

Kalapahar, a great warrior, born Hindu but converted to Islam (a historical figure)

Chintamani, a holy man

Mukundadev, king of Orissa

Visheshwar, a powerful brahmana

Saliman, nawab of Bengal

Leto, Chintamani's disciple

Chanchala, Kalapahar's female companion

Iman, the daughter of Saliman

Dolena, a friend of Iman

Kalapahar converts to Islam, then destroys many Hindu temples. In his early life he had had doubts about God, so he went to Chintamani. In the following conversation between Kalapahar and Chintamani, Girish incorporated Ramakrishna's ideas about ego, faith, reason, and the existence of God.

Chintamani asks Kalapahar who he is. When Kalapahar tries to introduce himself, Chintamani says: 'Look, if you remove the onion skin layer after layer, nothing remains at last. So this "I" disappears when you search for it.'

Kalapahar: 'Sir, does God exist?'

Chintamani: 'Yes, He does exist. I swear thrice, and I don't know that anything else exists.'

Kalapahar: 'Where is God?'

Chintamani: 'He is in that tamarind tree. He is in your heart. He is everywhere.'

Kalapahar: 'Have you seen him?'

Chintamani: 'Yes, I have. My guru showed him to me.'

Kalapahar: 'Who is the guru?'

Chintamani: 'Look, the guru is like a match-maker. He brings the disciple to God.'

Kalapahar: 'I see only darkness.'

Chintamani: 'Correct. Look, if the guru does not illumine the heart, one sees only darkness. How can a tiny human being with a tiny intellect understand the Truth? Take refuge in the guru, who is God in human form. Only the guru can remove your doubts.'

Kalapahar: 'This is blind faith—conjecture without reasoning. How can I accept that the all-pervading God lives in a human being? Where is the guru? How can I trust him? That guru is also a human being like me.'

Chintamani: 'You think that the guru is a man like you? The guru is a wish-fulfilling tree. He appears in this world as a human being to help all beings. He who takes refuge in the guru has his ignorance destroyed, and he sees his Chosen Deity by the guru's grace. Perhaps you tried to see God by closing your eyes for a couple of days, and when God did not come you concluded that there was no God and that the scriptures were all wrong.'

Kalapahar: 'Shall I have to proceed with blind faith like you?'



Chintamani: 'Look, don't get angry. Be calm and try to understand your foolishness. You are telling me that my faith is blind, yet I am surrounded by light. You, however, are roaming in darkness like a ghost, full of doubt!'

Kalapahar: 'I will not believe anything without reasoning.'

Chintamani: 'Aha! What an intellect you have! One attains God through faith, and you say that faith is blind. Only a blind person like you speaks that way.'¹⁶

In *Kalapahar* Girish also dramatized Ramakrishna's opinion of occult powers. The character Vireshwar is a brahmana who developed eight occult powers by carrying out difficult spiritual disciplines.

Chintamani: 'Hello, I hear that you have a power that whatever you utter comes true.'

Vireshwar: 'Yes.'

Chintamani: 'Well, why don't you say, "O God, appear before me." Let me see whether He comes or not.'

Vireshwar: 'What?'

Chintamani: 'Aha! You can't do that. Your power can only burn a tree, kill an elephant, or sink a boat. What useless powers you have!'

Vireshwar: 'What do you say?'

Chintamani: 'Look, don't show your angry red eyes to me. You think that you can kill me this moment.'

Vireshwar: 'Yes, I have that power. Do you know why the rulers of Bengal are continually changing? Those who fail to show me proper respect die. My anger kills them.'

Chintamani: 'I don't care for your power, even if it can kill me. People are killed by fire, water, sword, disease, snake, tiger, and so on. In fact, you are acting just like a cobra. I shall consider you great if you can make a person immortal. But I am sure you can't do that, even though you are endowed with eight occult powers.'

Vireshwar: 'Who are you?'

Chintamani: 'Never mind who I am. You should just think of yourself. What have you done with your life? You have acquired some useless powers

through sadhana. You have never inquired about God, the Creator of this universe. Get away from here. I don't like your company.'

Vireshwar: 'Sir, don't go away. Listen to me.'

Chintamani: 'Why should I listen to your rubbish? I would be eager to listen to you if you would tell me something about God.'

Vireshwar: 'Sir, teach me. I don't know God.'

Chintamani: 'Look, just as Uncle Moon is everybody's uncle, so God belongs to everyone. Call on God.'

Vireshwar: 'Let me tell you a little of my background. I was born a brahmana and then worshipped Mahamaya to obtain wealth, name, and fame. To acquire occult powers I practised austerities and sadhana in the cremation ground. Now I am a slave to this power of Mahamaya. How can I escape this bondage?'

Chintamani: 'Shun your ego and destroy this power of ignorance. Know for certain, egotism leads to hell. To whom do these powers belong? They belong to God. But you think these powers belong to you. Just as rainwater flows through a channel but the water does not belong to the channel, so also you are only a channel for God's power. It is God's will that human beings reap the results of their actions. Now repeat this mantra: "*Tuhun, tuhun; naham, naham*—Thou, thou; not I, not I." This is how you will be freed from bondage and the Divine Mother will be awakened in your heart. Look, I am teaching you. Is it my ego? Brother, this ego does not want to leave. *Naham, naham; tuhun, tuhun*—not I, not I, but thou, thou, O Lord.'

Vireshwar accepts Chintamani as his guru (3.218–20).

Later, Chintamani says to Vireshwar: 'What is there to fear? Give me all of your sins.'

Vireshwar: 'What do you say? You will take all my sins and my sufferings! Truly, here is someone who is a saviour of sinners. I have no more fear. My divine sight has been opened. I see God through the light of knowledge' (3.271).

In this section Girish depicted Ramakrishna's teaching how lust and gold delude men:

Chintamani: 'You are Kalapahar. Correct?'

Kalapahar: 'Yes, people say so.'

Chintamani: 'I hear that you do not listen to the women, so you are *kālā*, deaf; and that you sit in one place like a motionless *pahar*, rock. Now I see your rock is cracked.'

Kalapahar: 'How do you know that?'

Chintamani: 'I saw a girl disguised as a boy escort you to the nawab's garden where you met some girls and heard some love songs. Now you are meditating on those girls. These actions indicate that your heart is cracked.'

Kalapahar: 'Have you been following me?'

Chintamani: 'I saw where you were going. I know what human beings want.'

Kalapahar: 'How do you know what human beings want? Are you omniscient?'

Chintamani: 'Both of us know that men desire three things in this world: women, money, and name and fame.'

Kalapahar: 'Do people perform actions only to fulfil their selfish desires? Don't you know that some people work without any selfish motive?'

Chintamani: 'I understand what you mean. You are talking about compassion, helping others unselfishly.'

Kalapahar: 'Yes, that is correct. Don't you believe in these things?'

Chintamani: 'Yes, I do. But let me tell you about compassion. When I give something to someone, I feel that everyone should see me do this. Or if I secretly give a gift or money to someone, I tell all my friends and my family. If someone does not acknowledge a gift, I become angry and remark: "That fellow is ungrateful, unappreciative, and rude." I give charity to show off, and I expect praise from the recipient. Do you consider this to be an unselfish action?'

Kalapahar: 'Oh, you are amazing!'

Chintamani: 'The human mind is a mysterious thing. Once I meditated throughout the night and cried for God with a longing heart, with tears flowing from my eyes. After my meditation was over, I thought to myself how nice it would have been if someone could have seen me in that condition.

Since then I have understood the nature of this tricky mind. The darkness of coal goes away only when fire enters it. This mind is deceitful, so I silently watch it and restrain it.'

Kalapahar: 'You are a *jnani*, a man of wisdom' (3.223-4).

Ramakrishna's teaching on 'ripe I and unripe I' has been narrated here:

Saliman: 'Who are you?'

Chintamani: 'Which "I"? The "ripe I" or the "unripe I"?'

Saliman: 'I don't understand your "ripe I" and "unripe I".'

Chintamani: 'Well, my "unripe I" is: "I was born in Bengal as a brahmana. My name is Kalikrishna. I move around. I eat whatever I get and sleep wherever I find a place." My "ripe I" is: "I am a servant of God, a part of God, one with God. I can't speak any further about it. Then I will lose consciousness."'

Saliman: 'Are you a saint?'

Chintamani: 'I don't know. I have lost myself. I see that God has become everything. He is in the air, fire, water, earth, space, the stars, moon, and so on. You see, it is something extraordinary.'

Saliman: 'I don't understand what you're saying.'

Chintamani: 'How can you understand this? One cannot understand this through the intellect. A salt doll touched the ocean and became one with the ocean. What do you know if you do not know God?' (3.226-7).

Girish described Ramakrishna's message on the harmony of religions, universal love, and purity:

Dolena, a companion of Princess Iman, goes to a flower garden to pick flowers for Iman. Leto, a disciple of Chintamani, visits the same garden to pick flowers for the worship of God. Dolena gives a beautiful garland to Leto. Chintamani is delighted by the garland and the flowers, and he wants to use them for the worship. But Leto cautions his teacher that those flowers had been touched by a Muslim woman, so they should not be used for worshipping a Hindu god.

Chintamani: 'Shame on you, Leto! You still differentiate between Ishwara and Allah? God is one but

people call him by various names. As the same water is called *jal*, aqua, water, *pani*, so also the eternal God is called by people as Allah, God, Ishwara, Jehovah, and Jesus. This perception of difference comes from ignorance. Give up this idea of difference. God has many names, and each name is endowed with infinite power. People develop love for a particular name of God, who fulfils their desires when they call on Him. Muslims, Hindus, and Christians worship the same infinite God. Ignorant people fight among themselves because of their dualistic beliefs.'

Iman and Dolena come to see Chintamani.

Iman: 'Fakir [holymen], I had a desire to meet you.'

Chintamani: 'I also wanted to see you. I love those people who are intoxicated with love and forget themselves. You are one of them.'

Iman: 'Fakir, you love everyone. Will you teach me how to love all? Please don't refuse me. I am a wretched woman.'

Chintamani: 'Mother, don't think that you are wretched. You are the all-powerful, blissful Mother. You do not know your real nature because you are ignorant.'

Iman: 'Fakir, I am burning with misery. I am a sinner. I fell in love with a person [Kalapahar] who saved me from a lion. I am a Muslim girl. He is now madly in love with me, but I disappointed him. Please tell me, what shall I do now?'

Chintamani: 'My child, the Lord will show you the way.'

Iman: 'I am not pure. Without purity one cannot call on the pure God.'

Chintamani: 'My child, don't you know that one who takes God's name becomes free from sin? That person's soul becomes pure. For that reason the prophet declared: "Come, call on God and you will be free from sin."'

Iman: 'Fakir, your words are very encouraging. Please teach me how to call on God.'

Chintamani: 'Your mind will teach you. When one longs for God, one learns to call on him. I see that you long for God. Don't worry; God loves you. He is your beloved. Pour your love out to him.'

Iman: 'How shall I call on God?'

Chintamani: 'He has many names—Ishwara, Allah, Khuda. Call on him according to your aptitude. He will come, listen to you, and will be with you' (3.246–9).

Girish portrayed how he gave his power of attorney to Ramakrishna in the following scene:

Chanchala wants to be with Kalapahar, but discovers that he is in love with Princess Iman. Seeking revenge, Chanchala kidnaps Iman and Dolena and takes them to Mukundadev, the Hindu king of Orissa. Kalapahar had previously been Mukundadev's commander-in-chief and had defeated the Muslims. But when he learns that Iman had been kidnapped, he deserts the Hindu leader and converts to Islam. Taking control of the Muslim army, he invades Orissa and destroys Hindu temples. Mukundadev surrenders.

When Chintamani discovers that Chanchala is planning to kill Iman, he tells her: 'Listen, don't do such a thing. Give all your pain and misery to me.' He cannot stop her. After killing Iman, Chanchala kills herself.

Kalapahar: 'I can't bear this burning pain anymore!'

Chintamani: 'Give me all of your pain and suffering.'

Kalapahar: 'Who are you? Why do you want my suffering? You are always with me, O Compassionate One.'

Chintamani: 'Why do you say that? Call on God. He is the only Compassionate One.'

Towards the end of the drama, the Muslim army occupies the Hindu kingdom. Nawab Salim regrets the bloodshed and seeks advice from Chintamani.

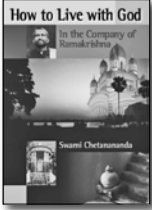
Chintamani: 'Don't be afraid. Call on God. Rule the country impartially. Treat Hindus and Muslims as equals. Give solace to those who are afraid. Don't be hostile to other religions. Be compassionate to all, so that both Hindus and Muslims will glorify you' (3.266–70). (To be concluded)

Reference

16. Girish Rachanavali, 3.215–17.

REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



How to Live with God: In the Company of Ramakrishna Swami Chetanananda

Vedanta Society of St Louis, 205 South Skinker Blvd, St Louis, MO 63105, USA.
2008. 584 pp. \$29.95.

A book on the Great Master by Swami Chetanananda is always, if I may put it that way, a phenomenon. This meticulously researched, deeply devotional book, beautifully produced with carefully chosen visual texts, is no exception. For the devotees as well as students of religious phenomena, this is an extraordinarily creative and comprehensive compendium for the practice of the presence of God—in this case, oriented to Ramakrishna as the Divine.

‘Sometimes we imagine,’ says the swami, ‘how wonderful it would have been if we could have lived with Buddha, Christ, or Ramakrishna.’ The initial wonder, if one persists with it, turns into intense and insistent longing—*vyakulata*, as the Master called it—to live with Ramakrishna, to tune oneself to his living presence. But then, this conviction needs to nourish itself on various fruitful modes of tuning oneself to the Divine. The methods that Chetanananda outlines, though centred on Ramakrishna as the Divine, are free from all doctrinaire culture-specific rigidities.

As the swami shows, the primal gods of the world’s religious traditions come alive in the various forms of Ramakrishna. It is a kind of second coming which steers clear of denominational differences. In his *bhagavata deha*, divine body, are vibrant intimations of the immortal incarnate divinities who swept the various corners of the world with their unbounded love, much as Ramakrishna seems to be doing now. One of the illustrations which grace the book—‘Ramakrishna in the form of Rama with bow and arrow, of Krishna with a flute, and of Chaitanya with a water pot’—is symbolic of the all-encompassing consciousness that was Ramakrishna’s.

The key to relating to and living with God is *atmiyata*, intimacy. This Sanskrit word, says Chetanananda, ‘comes from the root word for Atman, the Self’

And all relationships stem from and define themselves through that root. Thus, human relationships and the corresponding energies—inhering in the physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions of one’s being—become tools for personal transformation. Then the Master’s relation with us and ours with him coalesce; the remote and the impersonal changes into the intimate and the reciprocal.

These ‘strategies’ are meant to accelerate *atmiyata* and *sannidhya*, togetherness. Chetanananda’s book is about these strategies, defined and described in terms of vibrant incidents—God’s plenty. In the process, the three pillars of Bhagavan, bhakta, and Bhagavata are amply illustrated. Should you wish to concentrate on Bhagavan Ramakrishna; Chetanananda focuses on the *Trataka* or ‘fixed-gaze’ mode of relating, focusing on the various parts of the divine form. Ramakrishna’s feet, hands, and face; his dress; the way he moved from place to place—the grace of those movements—can all be objects of meditation. Leonine power and tenderness mingled in his frame.

Then comes the nourishment from the Master’s words—his *divyavani*—the various narratives recorded by people with different sensibilities. Here, Chetanananda expands the definition of the root text, the *Kathamrita* or *Gospel*, and introduces the reader to many other *Gospels*, which are yet to be fully translated into English. I found the chapter on ‘The Gospel of Ramakrishna according to Girish Chandra Sen’ particularly interesting. Sen’s record is called the *Adi Kathamrita*, and was published twenty-five years before M’s *Gospel*. And Ramakrishna was physically alive at that time. The swami also introduces us to the *Gospels* recorded by Suresh Chandra Datta, Ram Chandra Datta, and Swami Brahmananda. Extracts from these texts enrich the material already available in English in a remarkable way.

What about M’s *Gospel*—the root text—and its impact now? Devotees would be delighted to learn that the Master’s scripture is incredibly powerful in drawing out the spiritual potential of seekers from various faiths. There are deeply moving incidents which Chetanananda shares with us in his chapter on

'The Centenary of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'. A young woman from the American Midwest, with tears trickling from her eyes, told the swami: 'I bought a copy of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* from the Vedanta Press in Hollywood and read it. One night I was sleeping in the cottage near our farm; Ramakrishna appeared before me and gave me a mantra.' And she told the swami the mantra she received. There is also the incident of the American devotee who suffered the shock of recognition when she saw a photo of the Master for the first time. Chetanananda's comment is apt: 'I marvelled at how the Master was roaming around the vast *farmlands* of the Midwest in America and spotting those who feel sincere longing for God' (emphasis added).

Chetanananda also has a chapter on 'Ramakrishna in Streets and Meadows'. Soon these landscapes expand and geographical barriers are broken. Ramakrishna is the expert angler, the fisher of men and women longing to discover real order amidst apparent disorder. The disorder, of course, is engineered by the dominant driving forces that Ramakrishna characterized as 'woman and gold'. (We can, I suppose, write 'wo/man and gold'.)

Ramakrishna himself was a witness to the growth of these energies in colonial Calcutta. Chetanananda's chapter on 'Ramakrishna and the Bohemians' is an illuminating account of the Master and the 'bohemians' in his own 'circle'. If Girish Chandra Ghosh leads the list, Surendra Nath Mitra, Kalipada Ghosh, and Manmatha are no less. The only thing which has changed now is the increase in the number of bohemians, whether in the West or the East. Are they inimical to the devotees' quest? One who would like to look at Ramakrishna for a possible way out of spiritual problems finds this disturbing. This chapter should allay such fears.

One of the ways suggested for dealing with this complex issue is to persist with irrevocable faith in the Master. This of course calls for caution, particularly with regard to prejudices that metaphors like 'woman and gold' create. Chetanananda tells of an instance: A swami presented a copy of the *Gospel* to a professor. He soon returned it, offended by the (alleged) gender bias in the words 'woman and gold'. The swami suggested that he read only the portions he liked. The professor started doing so, and later, having gone through the whole book, told the swami: 'I think Ramakrishna is the answer to our society. I love this book very much. Our society is guided by two things: Dollar-king and Sex-queen. The teach-

ings of Ramakrishna are a nice solution to those problems.'

'Dollar-king and Sex-queen' (or 'money and matrimony', if we can put it that way) are components of the complex question of desire and spiritual life. The chapter on 'Ramakrishna's Desires' points out ways of taming desire when it crosses its limits by balancing it with the means for transcendence. The key lies not in suppressing or sublimating but in directing these tremendous energies into intimacy with God, the source of joy. If God is the centre of our lives, the margins will take care of themselves. Then *kama* becomes *akama*, like the raw mango ripening *naturally*. We have to wisely balance pickles and mango jam. In excess, the former lands us in acidity, the latter in diabetes. Changing the direction of desire through acceptance of and love for the Divine—that is the Ramakrishna way. Ramakrishna does not negate the primal energy that is desire. He promises to regulate it—if only we allow.

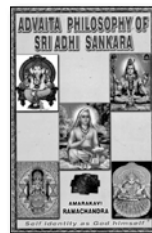
A result, as the swami says, of '35 years of in-depth study, research, and meditation on Ramakrishna', *How to Live with God*, with its twenty-eight sumptuous chapters, is an unfailing guide to all of us who have suffered despair and desperation in our search to relate ourselves to Ramakrishna, the Divine. The text is bound to prove enchanting to the devotee and a puzzle, if not a challenge, to the sceptic. It is a narrative marvel that outshines other such narratives. The humane tone that suffuses it is remarkable.

One devout Christian woman who attended Chetanananda's discourses read the *Gospel* and told him: 'Swami, one defect of this book is that it has an end.' One should be grateful to the swami that he graciously shared his long meditations on the Great Master and his divine play with us. We ought to read this book to enrich, deepen, and intensify our own faltering and fitful love for Ramakrishna.

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BOOK RECEIVED



Advaita Philosophy of Sri Adhi Sankara

Amarakavi Ramachandra

Hayagreeva Publication, 176 Big Street,
Triplicane, Chennai 600 005 E-mail:
hindudiksha@yahoo.co.in. 2007. xxiv +
149 pp. Rs 120.

REPORTS

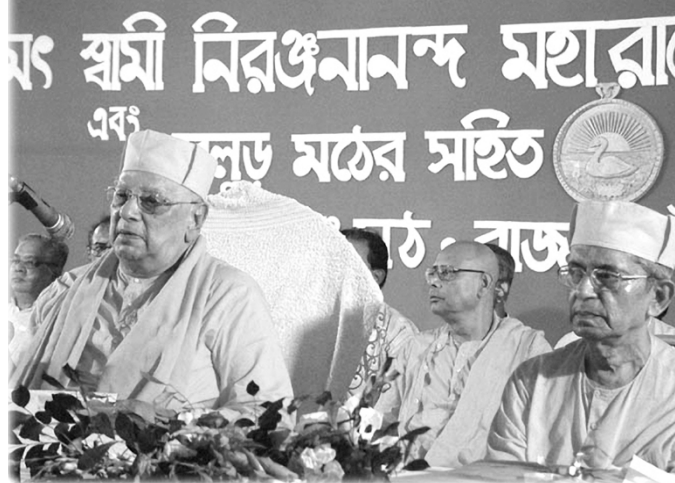
New Math Centre

A new branch centre of the Ramakrishna Math has been started at the birthplace of Swami Niranjanananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, at **Rajarhat Bishnupur, Kolkata**, with the land, buildings, and other facilities received from Sri Ramakrishna Niranjanananda Ashrama, Rajarhat Bishnupur. The handing over ceremony was held on 16 August 2008, the birthday of Swami Niranjanananda. Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, gave a benedictory speech and Swami Prabhanandaji, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, addressed the gathering. A large number of monks and devotees attended the function. The address of this new centre is: Ramakrishna Math, PO Rajarhat Bishnupur, Kolkata 700 135. Phone: (o) 90074-01963 (office) and (o) 90074-01971 (president).

Skill Development

The Industrial Training Centre of the **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya, Coimbatore**, was selected by Hindustan Machine Tools (International) to im-

Memorandum of understanding for skill development



Swami Atmasthanandaji speaks at Rajarhat Bishnupur

plement a government-of-India-assisted project for setting up a Rural Vocational Training Centre (RVTC) in Puttalam, Sri Lanka. The project's objective is to train instructors in different disciplines—fabrication of aluminium ware, computer basics, electrical works, and the like—who will later impart training through RVTC in Puttalam. On 16 July, a simple function was held at the Vidyalaya to inaugurate this skill-development initiative.

Besides, on 18 July, the Vidyalaya and Builders Association of India, Coimbatore (BAI, Kovai), signed a memorandum of understanding to provide training in construction skills to school dropouts. Accordingly, BAI, Kovai, will sponsor a hostel building and set up a training yard in the Vidyalaya campus.

For the last two years, local industries have responded positively to the initiative, sponsoring the entire cost of such ventures. The third batch of trainees was inducted on 25 June. 115 students registered themselves for skill-development programmes in six trades—fitter, turner, machinist, electrician, welder, and CNC operator. The training is totally free, and the trainees are assured of employment by the sponsoring companies. Of the 115 students, 85 are being provided free board and lodging facilities.

News from Branch Centres

On 8 August **Ramakrishna Math, Chennai**, organized a function as part of the centenary celebrations of its publishing house. On this occasion, 100 sets of subsidized books on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, in Tamil language, were released and distributed

Flood Relief Fund

The Ramakrishna Mission appeals to one and all to contribute generously to the flood relief fund. All donations paid in cash or by cheque / demand draft drawn in favour of 'Ramakrishna Mission' and payable at Kolkata are exempt from income tax under section 80-G of the Income Tax Act. Donations may please be sent to: The General Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Howrah, WB 711 202 (Ph: +91 33 2654 9581 / 9681; Fax: 2654 9885; E-mail: rkmrelief@gmail.com; Website: www.belurmath.org/relief).

free of charge to various schools in rural areas and to Seva Samitis in and around Chennai. The Math also held the annual meeting of rural youths at its premises on 15 August. About 1,100 beneficiaries of the rural projects of the Math—trainees in nursing, computers, automobile repairing, and mat-weaving—took part in the meeting.

Ramakrishna Math, Ulsoor, launched Yuva Jagriti, a youth awareness programme which aims to inculcate higher values in college students through activities such as gifts of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda-Vedanta literature to college libraries, sales of this literature, exhibitions, study circles, regular retreats, and annual conventions.

Relief

Flood Relief • In the wake of the recent devastating floods in Bihar, the following centres have started relief operations among flood victims of nearby areas: **Katihar** centre distributed chira, gur, and biscuits to 2,500 flood-affected persons from different areas of Madhepura district who have taken shelter in three school buildings at Rupauli town. **Muzaffarpur** centre has made arrangements to distribute primary relief items to flood victims in Saharsa district. In Uttar Pradesh, **Lucknow Sevashrama** has started providing food items and medical relief to about 3,000 worst-

affected flood victims of 10 villages in Bakshi-Ka-Talab Tahsil of Lucknow district. **Varanasi Home of Service** distributed 5,100 kg chira, 500 kg sugar, 6,000 kg flour, 600 kg dal, 5,040 packets of biscuits, 4,736 buns, 600 l kerosene oil, 1,200 matchboxes, 830 candles, and 173,900 chlorine tablets to 15,530 flood victims belonging to 39 villages of Haraiya and Maharajganj areas in Azamgarh district. Besides, the centre treated 556 patients in the above places. In West Bengal, **Belgharia** centre dispensed 2,900 kg fodder to 107 families for their cattle in Patashpur block, Purba Medinipur district, and 379 saris, 333 dhotis, 949 shirts, 212 pants, and 1,080 assorted garments to 177 families belonging to 5 villages in Patashpur, Narayanganj, Belda, and Sabang blocks in Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur districts. In addition, the centre created three book banks with 3,422 books in Patashpur, Belda, and Sabang blocks in Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur districts for the benefit of 856 students whose books had been washed away in the flood. **Manasadwip** centre handed over 562 kg chira and 100 kg gur to 1,689 flood victims belonging to 3 villages of Sagar block in South 24 Parganas district.

Distress Relief • **Ramakrishna Mission, Baranagar** supplied 323 sets of shirts and pants, 20 lungis, 162 frocks, 48 saris, 1,677 sets of utensils, and 129 bags to poor people of 3 areas in Kolkata and 6 villages in Hooghly, Purba Medinipur and North 24 Parganas districts. **Mangalore** centre distributed notebooks, textbooks, school bags, school uniforms, and umbrellas to 500 needy students of nearby areas. **Nattampalli Math** offered 1,077 sets of school uniform cloth to needy students. **Porbandar** centre presented textbooks and notebooks to 1,244 needy students.

Economic Rehabilitation • **Chennai Math** distributed sewing machines, binding tools, masonry tools, and other items to 35 leprosy afflicted persons to improve their existing businesses or start new ones.

